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Preludium: Ruins of the Genesis

October 31, 1981

"To most wizards, the situation would have seemed hopeless. His wand lay at the other end of the Chamber, snapped in half. Salazar Slytherin's King Basilisk advanced, its exact position hard to say with eyes closed shut."

James Potter built up a minor dramatic pause before his son's wide, alert state. Silently delighting in his son's rapt attention, James continued.

"However, Godric Gryffindor was not most wizards."

Reaching behind him, James placed his hands atop his head, removing an imaginary hat and clutching it close to his chest, a hand below and above.

"With the King Basilisk bearing down upon Godric, he reached inside his hat. You see, Harry, Godric's hat was very special. It was charmed so that he could call upon his sword at anytime. When he put his hand into the hat, his fingers curled around the handle of the legendary blade."

James paused for a moment, making an exaggerated movement to mimic holding a barely concealed weapon. While James admitted to himself it didn't make a very convincing image, his son didn't seem to mind too much.

"The evil Basilisk was very quick, so Godric couldn't move until the last second. Since Godric had his eyes closed, he had to use the sound of the Basilisk's swift movements cutting through the air to figure out how close the foul creature was."

With a flourish, James withdrew the imaginary blade with a flourish, while making an exaggerated movement to the left. His eyes closed, he couldn't see his son, but clearly heard his cry of delight.

"Godric sidestepped left as the Basilisk was about to strike, bringing the Sword of Gryffindor up in a swift arc. The basilisk let out a mighty cry before it crashed to the ground, dead."

James opened his eyes as he finished the story, drinking in the sight of his son, with a smile stretching from ear to ear.

"Throughout the years, Harry, it has always fallen upon the Potters to carry Gryffindor's legacy into the future. To uphold the tradition of bravery and justice is what our family has always strove for."

Lily chose this moment to break in. "Thankfully you met someone who would be able to pass intelligence down."

James gave his wife of two years a mock glare, which turned into a smile at her saucy wink. The mocking retort on the tip of his tongue was broken by a tapping sound coming from his right. Glancing in that direction, the source of the noise was proven to be a large eagle owl.

The Potter patriarch rose to his feet slowly, stretching his arms high above him and letting out a yawn. This apparently wasn't the sort of hustle the owl was looking for, as it let out an indignant shriek.

"Quiet you" replied James, more to himself than anyone else. He leveled a cold gaze at the owl, trying to convey his displeasure with the loud noise in the vicinity of Harry. James supposed that the owl wasn't exactly terrified by his attempt at an intimidating look, as indifference was the owl's only response.

He reached the window, and opened it up. As soon as it did, the owl swooped in, dropped the letter on the table, and departed just as swiftly as it had arrived. By the time Harry fully released his amazed, gleeful cry, it was as if the owl had never been there.

"I suppose it wasn't interested in a reply." Lily mused, from her maintained position in front of the sink, causing a slight smile to tug at the corners of his mouth.

After favoring his happily drooling son with an indulgent smile, James picked up the letter. Inspecting the envelope exterior revealed not a single mark, almost unsettling in its unremarkable nature. The anonymous nature of the post, combined with unknown

owner of the owl, raised the ire of James' survival instinct. There was something wrong here.

He placed the envelope on the table, and cast a detection charm on it, checking for any signs of magic. The white light washed through the yellow letter without incident, proving that it had not been tampered with. With a subtle movement of fingers, James broke the seal and reached inside to retrieve its contents. Inside was a single piece of parchment, folded in half, bereft of markings on the outside. His curiosity mounting, James opened the parchment, which appeared to have but a single sentence written upon it:

"The Potter residence can be found at Seventeen Peverell Way"

James found himself frozen for a second, his mind unable to grasp the meaning the letter implied. It was Lily's voice which partially broke him of his paralysis.

"Who's it from?"

"It's him. He's found us" replied James, his calm voice displaying that the full impact of their being compromised has not completely sunk-in.

Lily's dropped the plate she was washing. There was no mistaking who "He" was. The porcelain plate hit the floor with a crash, shards splaying across the beige floor. The breaking of the china cut through the haze like Lily's voice hadn't. They were compromised. The Dark Lord was on his way to destroy their family.

"Make sure no one comes through the back!" James yelled, as he started a sprint to the hallway, withdrawing his wand from his pocket as he moved. He caught a glimpse of Lily starting to rush to collect Harry from the kitchen table before he left the kitchen.

The pounding of James' feet on the hardwood floor sounded like hammer falls to him, his senses tuned to their utmost sensitivity.

Entering the foyer a second later, James moved into position, his back up against the wall to the right of the front door. His ears strained, trying to distinguish between the furious beatings of his heart and the imaginings of his paranoia. Only silence greeted his ears.

"Where the fuck is he?" James thought to himself. Given the Dark Lord's reported pride and self-confidence, he should have just gone through the front door. Mentally preparing himself, James inched his left hand towards the handle of the front door. His hand making contact with the cool brass, he pulled the handle down sharply, and threw the thick mahogany door open. Wand at attention, he swiftly moved into the doorway.

The front yard was awash in starlight, completely undisturbed. Turning his eyes to the road, he saw it empty, the only way in and out of his home. Eyes straining, he inspected every corner of the closely cut grass that filled the front lawn, as well as the edges of the thick forest that surrounded his home, searching for the tell-tale distortions of a disillusionment charm.

James' search turning up empty only deepened his sense of unease. Nearly oblivious to the night chill, he shut the door. He couldn't help but feel like he was animal caught in a hunter's trap. Where was the hunter though? Resigning himself to check the back yard as well, James started down the hallway. Halfway down the white-walled corridor James stopped, his instincts screaming. Had he heard something at the door just now?

Without warning, the front door was blown inward, ricocheting off the banister and landing askew against the hallway wall. The Dark Lord swiftly followed, stepping out of the darkness. James felt his insides turn to ice upon gazing at the serpentine face, the red slits of the Dark Lord's eyes narrowed, a cruel smile upon his face.

Smiling, as though what was going to happen was a foregone conclusion. As if James intended to make it easy for the Dark Wanker.

James wasted no time, and cast a bone-shattering curse at the intruder.

Voldemort reacted with a sweep of his arm, using his wand to swat the curse aside like a bothersome insect, quickly retorting a yell of "Avada Kedavra!".

James replied with a silent Wingardium Leviosa, immediately followed by a banisher. The door exploded upon contact with the

sickly green curse, the following banisher sending the shrapnel back at Voldemort in a rain of mahogany splinters.

The Dark Lord swept his wand upwards, vanishing the wooden shrapnel as James flung another spell.

Voldemort lowered his wand, and spun around to the left of the bludgeoner, barely avoiding it. He waved his thirteen inches of yew as he was coming out of the spin, transfiguring the banister into a viper as the bludgeoner hit the rear wall, tearing into the plaster with a minor detonation.

James followed up with another bone-breaker, but Voldemort was already moving, ducking into the living room, the spell zipping harmlessly past him.

James quickly found himself on the defensive, with the transfigured viper bearing down upon him. With mere feet to spare, he snapped off a quick cutting curse, lopping off the serpent's head.

The snake disposed of, James turned towards the hallway table, turning it into a lion with a wave of his wand. He then compelled it to rush the living room. The lion complied, rushing down the hallway, James following right behind it.

The lion slowed at it reached the entry into the living room, its claws sliding on the floor. Before the animal had broken its momentum, a blasting curse from the living room struck the lion in the face, detonating the animal in a spray of red gore.

Heedless of the bits of brain and bloodied flesh sprayed on him, James blindly cast a blasting curse around the corner of the entryway, back in the approximate direction that Voldemort's curse arrived from.

James heard his spell impact on a shield, and saw it travel back the way it came. It passed in front of him, traveling into the dining room, where it detonated against the opposite wall in a spray of wooden shrapnel. His quickly conjured physical shield saved him from the deadly rain of debris.

Before he could lower the shield, he felt a cutting curse graze his neck. On his peripheral, James saw the cutting curse that missed

his jugular by a mere two inches impact against the wall. Voldemort had almost finished him with a blind cast through the wall.

Backing up, he saw Voldemort turn the corner from the living room, wand raised, a killing curse upon the edge of his tongue.

A quick visual inventory revealed nothing left in the hallway to absorb the brunt of the curse. His choices slimming, James ran shoulder-first into the bathroom door. It yielded without resistance, James stumbling to the floor as the green light passed behind him, assaulting his senses with the sickly feeling of the darkest of magic.

Gathering his wits about him, James scrambled to his feet, using the marble sink for purchase. Steeling himself to re-enter the fray, Voldemort's Sonorous enhanced voice stopped him in his tracks.

"James, do I have your undivided attention!" spoke Voldemort, his voice seemingly omnipresent.

The silence stretched out for a moment, before being broken by a casting.

"Confringo!"

From the living room, the sound of an explosion assaulted James' ears.

"Did you hear that, James? Your fireplace is no more. That was your sole hope of escape. Your family will die tonight James. And there is nothing you can do to stop this."

James heard the confidence in Voldemort's voice. It wasn't even a question to him whether he would succeed.

"You have only two choices: A quick death by your hand or a long, torturous demise by my wand. What's it going to be, James?"

The fact that Voldemort thought a father would just lay down his life to spare himself some pain reinforced to James that he was dealing with a being devoid of all humanity. While quickly planning to strike back in the silence following the ultimatum, he heard Lily cast a banisher, followed quickly by a large explosion in the foyer. Lily must

have used one of the explosive potions they had hidden in the kitchen.

James rushed out of the bathroom, his wand drawn, trying to breathe through the cloud of dust that inhibited the hallway. Choking on the particulate filling his lungs, he turned back to the bathroom, and cast three successive Reductor curses. The red spells struck the sink and toilet, pulverizing the marble fixtures. Water began to spray from the broken plumbing, the torrents creating a rapidly spreading pool.

His wand snapped back to the other end of the hallway, James backpedaled out of the dust cloud, into the kitchen. There, Lily embraced him from behind, providing a warm counterpoint to the chill of the night, which gained entrance through the window that had been blown out by Voldemort's missed killing curse.

Harry's cries brought James' attention off to the right, where he saw that Lily has placed their son in the spacious sink, to keep him out of harm's way. Turning himself around, he grasped Lily slightly above the elbows on both arms.

"Why didn't you escape!" demanded James, furiously motioning to the broom closet at the far end of the kitchen.

"We couldn't!" Lily countered. "There's a whole bunch of Death Eaters out back! They've been doing an anti-flight chant ever since Vol-Voldemort came!"

Shifting his attention to the backyard, James saw six figures in Death Eater attire, synchronized voices performing the exact chant Lily described. The illusions he had harbored of holding off Voldemort long enough for his wife and son to escape on broom vanished.

He started to lose himself to anger before Lily shook him back to awareness, reminding him that he had a family to defend.

"The air's starting to clear." warned Lily.

Focusing his sight on the cloud, he did notice that it was becoming more opaque, the clouds of dust disappearing before his eyes. Voldemort was using filtering charms to clear his view of the two

Potters. James turned to the side, and squared a quick look into the eyes of the woman he loved, steeling his determination, and seeing the same will to protect their son reflected back at him. His wife assumed a position beside him, and they both leveled their wands towards the quickly dissipating cloud.

James saw the form of Voldemort emerge from the living room; his dark cloak covered in dust, but physically unharmed, his crimson eyes ablaze with burning hatred. James wasted no time, and pointed his wand to the left, transfiguring two chairs into wolves. He heard his wife snap off two quick Confundus charms as James sent a compulsion at the wolves to attack the Dark Lord.

The wolves passed the two Potters at a sprint, heading down the corridor. Lord Voldemort's quick Protego appeared in front of him as James transfigured the bit of ceiling above Voldemort into sulfuric acid. Just as the charms bounced off Voldemort's shield, he raised his wand above his head, dropping the shield. With a wave of his wand he flung the pool of acid directly into the two wolves, which had made it halfway down the hall.

The acid hit the wolves with an audible sizzle, stopping them in their track, leaving them to thrash out their final, agonizing moments on the floor.

Voldemort snapped his shields back into place just in time to deflect Lily's two Diffindo curses. James noticed that she was varying the placement of her spells each time, to make deflecting them back very difficult.

A slight smile of pride reached his face as James twirled his wand in a complicated motion, causing a claw made from wood and plaster to materialize from the wall beside Voldemort.

The Dark Lord jumped backwards to avoid the claw swipe, the sharp tips just missing his midsection. He then sent a blasting curse at the giant claw, destroying James' construct.

Undeterred, James transfigured the remains of the wolves into a length of chain, which he then banished at Voldemort. The Dark Lord's cutter bisected the chain in two, sending the two split pieces flying behind him. Aiming his wand, he then sent a slicing curse at

James. As soon as the grey curse left Voldemort's wand, the two shorter lengths of chain sprung to life, forcing his arms to the side.

Mentally thanking Lily for her quick thinking, James shot an ice spear at Voldemort. The slicing curse and the ice spear passed one another, above the spreading pool of water. James spun around to the left to avoid the curse, but he wasn't quick enough. As the slicing curse struck James in a spray of blood, he saw the ice spear hit Voldemort in the chest. The spear shattered upon impact, shredding his armor to pieces, but saving him from being impaled. The vast impact knocked him onto his back, just ahead of the shards of ice from the shattered spear that pattered into the thin layer of water.

As James collapsed onto his back, he saw his wife's attention snap from Voldemort to him. Lily appeared over him, lifting the split and bloodied shirt upwards. From the sharp intake of her breath, James could tell it wasn't good.

"Stay still James, I can fix this." reassured Lily, as she pointed her wand at his freely bleeding stomach.

"Cutis consuo" whispered Lily. James felt the flesh sealing spell take effect, his skin painfully stretched together, but at least the bleeding would stop and his guts wouldn't fall out. James sent out a smile of assurance to Lily, who exhaled with relief, shifting slightly.

Peeking around her right side, he saw Voldemort assume a sitting position, taking aim with his wand. Quickly wrapping Lily in a tight embrace, he rolled them both to the right, the killing curse impacting the floor they occupied a mere second ago. Tiny fragments of marble tile bounded harmlessly off tumbling forms, which came to rest four feet to the right, out of the hallway's line of sight.

Hearing Voldemort struggle to his feet, a still entangled James freed his arm, and started conjuring water, creating a pool in front of them. He stopped conjuring water when he saw the pool he created had touched the one formed from the broken plumbing, which had begun to snake around the corner. With the splashing sounds of Voldemort making his way towards them through the water, James leveled his wand at the joined water bodies.

"Fulminis tangere!"

A bolt of lightning jumped from James' wand, hitting the pool of water. James heard the scream of pain and anger as the lightning discharged into the water, quickly followed by a large crashing sound, and a body hitting the ground with a dull thud. With a small, grim smile, James realized that Voldemort had been blasted straight through ruined front wall, landing in the lawn. James knew that probably wasn't enough to kill Voldemort, but it would buy him some time, given the short paralysis that accompanied electrocution.

Lily scrambled to her feet, helping James to his. As she started to move towards the mouth of the hallway to resume the battle, James clamped onto her arm. Taking in her questioning gaze, he shook his head once, before speaking.

"Lily, take Harry and go! Run! I'll hold him off!"

Lily looked ready to rebel, but James saw her begin to fully take in the exhaustion that he was sure was reflected in his eyes, and in his stature. They had thrown their best at Voldemort, but James knew he didn't have a lot left to give. Their sole remaining hope was to at least give Harry a chance. He quickly pulled her close, and met her wanting lips with his own; attempting to send his unsaid everything through their last kiss, his undying love for her. They mutually broke it, only a fraction of a second after contact.

It wasn't enough, and James knew it. With regret and heavy heart, James watched the woman he loved scoop up his wailing son from inside the sink, and into her wanting arms. His last glimpse of his family was Lily running through the dining room entryway, her vibrant red hair streaming behind her, his son's bright green eyes looking at his tear-rimmed hazel ones from over Lily's shoulder.

Employing Occlumency to block out the tsunami of despair threatening to overwhelm him, he transfigured the kitchen table into a tiger, which he then called to himself. Rapping the tiger sharply on the head with his wand, eliciting a low growl from the feline predator, James disillusioned the tiger. Glancing into its eyes, James established a rudimentary mental link with it, ordering it to stay in the opposite corner of the kitchen, silent and waiting.

The command given, the tiger bounded off into the corner, a moving collage of shifting camouflage, awaiting the go-ahead to attack.

The sound of heavy splashing alerted James that his foe had risen to resume the fight. James pointed his wand at the pool of water, and flung another spell.

"Conglaciatus!"

A blast of fire shot from around the corner, stilling James' mass freezing spell.

James was slightly amused to note that the first thing to turn the corner was Voldemort's bare, blistered feet, his boots probably burned off. Twirling his wand, James let loose with a curse.

"Abruptus secare!"

With an expert twirl of his wand, Voldemort batted away the severing curse to his right, and replied with an incantation of his own.

"Amovere typhonis!"

James started to duck down to minimize the impact of the hurricane banisher, but the tidal wave of force moved too quickly, lifting and throwing him over the kitchen counter, along with every other object in the kitchen that wasn't secured down. He landed atop a motley collection of kitchen utensils that had been flung with him. While he felt several flares of pain from landing on sharp objects, he wasn't about to be deterred. Using the counter, he pulled himself quickly to his feet, the translucent crimson of a Protego shielding him.

Reaching his feet, an unknown sickly brown spell impacted the shield, shattering it in a shower of sparks. The force knocked James backwards into the refrigerator, and elicited a gasp of pain, as the bonds holding his stomach together broke apart. Moving his left arm to cradle his midsection, he began to raise his wand.

Halfway through the motion, Voldemort's bludgeoner impacted James' left shoulder, spinning him around, and sending him tumbling to the ground. He shot out his left arm to stop his fall, succeeding, but his guts kept on going, hitting the ground with a wet slap. Before James could react, Voldemort's next spell assaulted his ears.

"Accio!"

Before James could react, his intestines began to un-spool from his stomach in a glut of blood; now outside the innate magical shielding the body produces to prevent organ summoning. In a scream of agony, James broke the compulsion preventing the tiger from attacking. Freed from its mental bonds, the disillusioned tiger sprang forward and clamped its jaws down on Voldemort's wand arm.

The grayish retreating rope went slack with Voldemort's attention broken, the length of intestine flopping to the floor. James heard the cracking of the Dark Lord's forearm splintering beneath the tiger's teeth. The spraying crimson wound revealed the outline of the tiger's head.

Looking towards the hole in his stomach, James fought through his pain, and leveled his wand at where his guts were trailing out.

"Diffindo" James whispered.

The curse struck at the wound site, lopping off the intestine that hung loose off his body. He then cast the sealing spell upon his stomach, closing off the wound yet again. Hearing a scream of pain and the clattering of a wand falling to the ground, James began to pull himself to his feet, using the counter heavily to gain purchase. He gained his feet just in time to spy Voldemort withdraw a knife from his robe, and plunged it through the eye socket of the tiger, killing it instantly.

Pushing away the pain, James brought up his wand and fired off a blasting curse. Voldemort reacted by pulling the limp tiger tightly to him, and spinning the corpse around. The spell intended to kill the wandless Voldemort hit the tiger center mass, detonating the corpse in an explosion of gore. James went to cast again, but Voldemort dove after his wand, the kitchen island blocking the Potter patriarch's line of sight.

Reaching below him, James wretched open a specific kitchen drawer, and withdrew one of the three spare wands he had hidden around the house. Upon backing away from the counter, he heard a door slam upstairs. Despite the intense pain wracking his body, James couldn't help but feel glad that his wife and son had made it upstairs. That meant she only needed about another minute to activate the wards. Time James had every intention of giving her.

Having made the decision to draw back and re-group, he backed through the doorway, into the dining room. Focusing hard, he raised the wand in his right arm.

"Clypeus clusa exeo!"

The translucent, blue, one-way permeable shield shimmered into existence. James could already feel the strain of the power-heavy spell, but held it in place, and raised his spare wand with his other hand. James knew he was edging close to magical exhaustion, on the brink of physical collapse, and double casting would only accelerate the both of them. Nonetheless, this is where he would make his last stand. Success or death, Lily needed time.

Voldemort stepped into the doorway, brandishing his wand in his opposite hand, as James finished raising the spare wand. James immediately opened fire, two severing curses followed by a jet of flame.

The Dark Lord swatted the first two curses with an expert twirl of his wand, finishing with a sweeping motion that transfigured the fire into ice. The deflected spells dissipated upon the blue shield. As the newly formed ice fell to earth, Voldemort replied with a dark grey curse.

The shield-detonating curse hit the shield before James could lower it, blasting apart the shield in a large explosion. The force from the detonation threw James backward onto the dining room table, his eleven inch mahogany wand wrenched from his grasp. He began to raise the spare from this prone position. A foot off the table, Voldemort's severing curse stuck his wand, lopping off all his fingers in a glut of blood, and cutting the wand in half.

Having no fingers to hold it with, the other half of the wand fell to the table with a small clatter.

"Crucifixus absconitis!"

Upon Voldemort's spell striking, James felt his arms forcefully stretched out to his sides, perpendicular to his torso, followed by an invisible blunt object being forcefully punched through his wrists, binding him to the table.

James let instinct taking over, and let out his screams of agony. Through the pain, he noticed the furious red eyes of the Dark Lord. His offensive campaign at an end, James sought a new strategy.

"My son is going to kill you, Tom" spoke James, attempting to keep the physical anguish out of his voice.

Searching for a reaction that would incite Voldemort to torture him and perhaps buy Lily more time, James found none but a small smirk pulling at the corners of Voldemort's mouth as he raised his wand, and slashed it vertically.

"Falcis scindere!"

The spell left Voldemort's wand in a vertical column of dark grey energy, splinters flying as the magical equivalent to a chainsaw cut through the middle of the oak table. Despite the futility of the action, James spent what he knew would be his final moments of life struggling against the bonds of the crucifixion curse, his eyes blazing with a defiance that would make Gryffindor himself proud.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Lily could still taste the lingering red wine that her husband was so fond of upon her lips, her final memento from the man she loved. While she couldn't argue with the logic of abandoning her husband to the whims of the madman, guilt weighed upon her like a wet blanket.

Harry's body convulsed slightly in her arms, having an entirely silent tantrum, courtesy of her silencing charm. Not that she could blame Little Harry, since she had just left her husband to die. Fucking hell. In a burst of self-pity, she cursed fate for dropping that damned prophecy upon their laps.

Terrible as she felt at this moment, she wasn't going to let her husband's sacrifice go to waste. Rubbing Harry's back in a futile attempt to soothe him, she inched further into the dining room, all the way to the doorway into the foyer. She stood there for a moment, ears strained.

She heard the cold voice of Voldemort cast an Amovere typhonis, followed by the resultant crashes from the kitchen. Seizing the

opportunity of Voldemort being out of the hallway's line of sight, she cast quick silencing charms on her feet, and then walked through the entryway.

The foyer was a ruin. Not a single wall had been untouched, peppered with various scorch marks and punctures in the wood and plaster. The front wall had almost been completely destroyed, letting in the chill of the late night. While for a second she was tempted to make a run for it on Harry, she thought better of it, the edge of the wards being too far away.

With one last look to the night outside, she approached the stairs. They had not been spared from the wrath of the explosive potion, the first two steps missing completely. Taking a large, unsteady step, she stepped upwards onto the third step. She landed off balance, and sidestepped to the left to maintain equilibrium. Her left foot placed itself directly onto a long wooden splinter, which stabbed directly into the heel of her foot.

In what Lily found to be an admirable feat, she successfully held back the mixed scream of pain and anger. Leaning herself against the wall, she took hold of the miniature wooden spear protruding from her heel, and ripped it out in one swift movement. Blood immediately began to well from the wound in a steady flow. Lily displayed her displeasure by throwing the malevolent piece of wood to the ground. She then moved to seal the wound, but thought better of it. She wanted Voldemort to know which room that they went into, so he wouldn't check the others too closely.

Settling for a numbing charm upon her foot, she continued up the stairs, leaving bloody footsteps in her wake. The condition of the stairs improved in appearance with each successive step, Lily was thankful to note. Gaining the top, she ran to the first door on the right, and entered.

Once inside Harry's room, Lily slammed the door close. Running over to the crib, she gently laid the silently bawling Harry into it. Turning, she pointed her wand at a seemingly meaningless patch of floor, and whispered "Accio."

A square cut of wood rose from the floor, and flew towards Lily, who caught it then tossed it aside immediately. She ungracefully fell to her knees, sacrificing grace for brevity. Inside the revealed space

was a hollow, a cubic foot in dimension. At the bottom lay a circle of ivory, with a runic symbol carved into it, of Futhorc origin.

Lily's wand tip pressed to the ivory carving, she let loose with the incantation for rune activation.

"Acrosis aeternus!"

With the final syllable spoken, a red light gathered at the tip of her wand. The crimson light spread to fill the runic symbol like a liquid filling a mold, and the intensified in brightness. As Lily began to shield her eyes, the light exploded in an expanding sphere, passing through her harmlessly, seeping into the eight boundary stones embedded into the wall. The entire perimeter of the room flashed a bright crimson before fading into nothingness, the wards completely swathing the room fully activated.

This had been the backup plan that the two elder Potters had concocted. As a last ditch effort against Death Eaters penetrating the house's defenses, James would hold off the intruders for as long as possible, while Lily activated the room's protections. For the persistent trespasser, they would receive a nasty surprise if they tried to hammer down the wards.

However, Lily had her own contingency plan. One that she had taken pains to ensure James had never discovered.

Rushing back to Harry's crib, she removed the shirt from the silently struggling infant. While she felt regret about leaving the silencing charm on her son, she needed complete silence and the accompanying effect on her concentration to even have a chance of not fucking this up.

Lily moved her wand, pointing it at her arm. Taking a deep breath she then whispered "Diffindo"

The curse slashed into her upper arm, causing minimal splatter, as the spell had not been cast with an over-abundance of power. Lily smeared the blood welling from the cut onto her fingers, and lowered her fingers towards her son.

Taking a moment to visualize the rune that had been etched upon her mind by countless study, she wondered if it was all mothers that

would strive to these types of magic in a time of need. Well, she hadn't been sorted into Gryffindor by accident. With a pang of regret, she whispers "Petrificus Totalus". She can't have Harry disturbing the rune once it's been drawn.

Using her fingers, in the fashion she had practiced in secret for the past year, she began to draw the rune. Due to her diligence in practicing this, the shape quickly formed upon Harry's chest, dexterous fingers dancing to her mind's tune.

After a minute of work, Lily looked down, satisfied in her craftsmanship. The symbol was a vivid red upon the pale skin on her son's chest, a relic from a time long since past, culled from deepest depths of the Potter ancestral library. It was one half of an equation, a destination for the sacrifice she long ago decided to make.

"Magic of the sacrificed, may you shield the innocent from harm."

The first line uttered, a slight glow began to radiate from the rune.

"Love of the sacrificed, may you shield the innocent from hate."

Upon conclusion of the second line, the rune intensified in brightness.

"Life of the sacrificed, may you shield the innocent from death."

The third and final line completed, the rune's luminescence intensified to the point of filling the entire room with light, before retreating back to its source.

The first half of the ritual completed, Lily moved to the full length mirror set into the closet door. Crossing her hands as she reached her hands down, she hooked her petite hands into the bottom of her shirt, and pulled it off. Creamy white skin met her gaze in the mirror, not mired by the cavalcade of freckles usually so prominent in red-heads. This was the part that Lily had spent the most time practicing, which had the smallest margin of error.

Inhaling deeply, she lanced another cutting curse across her upper arm, slightly to the right of the previous wound. She dipped her fingers into the blood from the new wound, and began her painting anew. Using the mirror-image technique that she had practiced ad-

nauseum, she carefully drew the counterpart to the rune inscribed upon her son's chest.

Upon completion, she inspected her own work carefully in the mirror. Lily had to make sure there were no mistakes, for even the slightest divergence from the design could render all her efforts useless. Her inspections led her to the undeniable conclusion that it was perfect.

Before she could begin the chant, she felt the sickly drain of magic associated with the killing curse. While Lily knew the fact that Voldemort was saturating the wards was more important right now, fresh tears formed at the insides of her eyes as she knew that her husband must be dead.

A second curse striking the wards, accompanied by a sizzling from the wards broke Lily of the sorrowful reverie. She wouldn't let her husband's sacrifice be in vain.

Intent on finishing the ritual, she took up the verse again.

"I willingly sacrifice my magic, should harm befall the innocent."

"I willingly sacrifice my love, should hate befall the innocent."

Upon completion of the second line, the third killing curse struck the wards. The hiss of the perimeter boundaries transferring energy to the discharging stone met her ears, as the slight smell of ozone met her nose.

"I willingly sacrifice my life, should death befall the innocent."

The ancient words spoken, both runes written in blood let out a final flash, before sinking into their bodies, not a single mark or streak left behind. She exhaled heavily upon seeing the rune disappear into her flesh, secure in the knowledge that everything had gone according to plan. The ritual had but one act left for completion: a willing act of sacrifice.

A fourth Avada Kedavra struck the wards, causing the boundary stones to practically scream with the strain. This suggested the discharging stone was fully saturated, no longer accepting the, no longer converting the magical discharge sent from the boundary

stones into heat. One more strike to the ward would overload it, detonating the discharging stone in a violent explosion.

Judging by the attack upon the ward, Voldemort hadn't bothered to fully investigate the nature of the discharging stone. Lily knew it was very unlikely that he wouldn't figure out it was in the closet of the room opposite to Harry's, but held out hope that he wouldn't scrutinize the discharging stone's housing more closely.

Not wishing to waste any more time, in the event that the secondary protections the Potters had placed upon Harry's room failed, Lily cast two flesh knitting spells upon her arm, then with a whisper of "Scourgify", cleansed her skin of all traces of blood. Moving quickly, she threw her own shirt back on, then moved over to Harry's crib. She forced his shirt back on his prone body, and then cancelled the two charms she had cast previously.

Harry was vocal in his displeasure with his treatment, and responded with cranky cries, waving his arms above his head with newfound freedom, tiny fists clenched in anger. Still feeling bad about her treatment of him, she leaned down and placed a kiss upon her son's forehead.

"I'm so sorry, Harry." Lily whispered.

The moment her lips left her son's head, the final Unforgivable curse struck the ward. With a loud sizzle, the wards blinked out of existence. Lily had a moment to feel fear and plant herself in front of her son's crib before a massive detonation ripped through the house.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Voldemort watched impassively as the spell cut through the end of the table, and continued into the opposite wall, splitting the wall before the energy behind the spell exhausted itself. In the aftermath, the only sound heard was the steady rain of blood from Potter's crudely bisected body seeping through the split table.

While he would have liked to savor his victory over the Light wizard, who had turned out to be more formidable than anticipated, the woman had run too easily. More likely, there was some sort of plan in place that needed time to develop. Why else would James have tried to stall him with his pathetic efforts? As if the petty insults of a

Mudblood lover such as himself were of any consequence to Lord Voldemort.

Sparing a glance to his ruined arm, he tried to move his fingers. He let out a sneer of disgust as the digits lay motionless. The tiger must have severed the tendons in his hand.

The Dark Lord pointed his wand at the table, transfiguring the set silverware into a shapeless blob. With a wave, the blob moved onto his arm, filling the bloody cavity left by the transfigured animal, stopping the bleeding. Forever losing the ability to perform Light based healing spells due to his total immersion in the Dark Arts was a trivial price to pay from the immense power granted to him, even if it was occasionally an inconvenience.

His arm hanging limply to his side, Voldemort strode from the dining room and approached the foot of the stairs. He stopped before ascending and noticed the track of bloody footsteps leading up the staircase, beginning at the third step, quickly concluding that the foolish Mudblood must have forgotten to cover her tracks.

Following the trail up the stairs led him to the first door on the right. He knew that she had picked this room for a reason. With James' pathetic attempts to delay pursuit of his wife, it seemed correct to assume that she had needed time to activate protections upon the room.

Turning his wand upon his face, he hissed out an incantation.

"Trafero visi veneficus!"

The magical sight spell cast, he saw the physical world fall away, replaced with the magical one. In front of him was no longer a room, but a box shape in a translucent light red, with dark crimson foreign runes at the vertices of the opaque box. Directly in the middle of the room lay a larger red symbol, etched in familiar Futhorc runes, the controlling rune for the entire ward.

He recognized the scheme used. It was a simple box ward, which normally wouldn't have given him any problems, but the boundary stones were in a runic language unfamiliar to him. The sound dampening nature of the scheme rendered his knowledge of Futhorc

chants useless, since the deactivation command couldn't breach the ward.

While a simple scheme unto itself, he found the craftsmanship to be admirable. It was no easy task using runes from dissimilar origin within the same ward. However, if finesse was eliminated as an option, he was more than willing to exercise brute force, and hammer the wards down.

Raising his wand, he cast a killing curse at the barrier. The green curse hit the ward, being quickly absorbed by the protection, transforming the energy of the killing curse with a bright red discharge, into a sickly brown color, that was quickly sucked in the opposite direction. He turned his head, following the trajectory of the banished energy. It flew towards an area that he surmised was probably the closet in the room opposite the warded one, and then disappeared in a muted flash of red.

An unsettling smile found its way onto Voldemort's face. Did the Potter's have so little respect for his skills that they thought this would actually work? That he would just neglect to locate where the discharging stone would be located, that he would just let himself be consumed by the explosion of an overloaded heat sink?

A discharging stone was at the heart of most-small scale warding schemes. It served as an energy transformation mechanism, from magical to heat. Any spells impacted upon a ward tied to a discharger would be transformed into generic magical energy, before being attracted by the discharger. This was really the only way small scale wards could function, as the relatively small size of the boundary stones couldn't handle much excess energy before shorting out.

He had found, without fail, that there was no better curse for overloading dischargers than the Avada Kedavra. While discharging stones did tend to explode upon being overloaded, a quick conjured physical shield was more than adequate to shield one from the rain of deadly shrapnel.

With a wave his wand, he canceled the spell upon his eyes, the physical world returning to his sight. Before lowering his wand, he cast another killing curse. Upon impact with the ward, the boundary

stones sizzled slightly with the strain of dissipating the immense magic of the Unforgivable curse.

He waited ten seconds before his next cast, not wishing to deplete himself magically should something go awry, and force him to fight his way out.

At the end of his self-imposed breather, he cast again. This time around, the wards flashed angrily, hissing with the effort of the transformation process. A slight smell of ozone hit his snake-like nostrils, implying the transfer was no longer completely efficient. He calculated it would only take two more curses to destroy the ward.

The next cast caused the entirety of the ward to flash a furious red, as opposed to a solitary spot, accompanied by the wards literally squealing with effort. The smell of ozone was much stronger this time around, adding further evidence that his calculation was correct.

One more Unforgivable, and immortality was at his finger tips, his only obstacle a Mudblood and an infant. Voldemort savored the feeling of inevitable success for a moment, before flinging the final killing curse. The green blight impacted with the ward, which then attempted to transfer the energy inert. It failed, the wards breaking apart in a shower of red sparks.

The moment the green light left his wand, he swung himself around, solid physical shield in place. Scant seconds later, the discharger detonated with an explosive crack. He heard the shrapnel tear through the opposite wall, and braced himself for the impending impact upon his shield.

He was wholly unprepared for the debris that punched through his shield like it was butter. The shrapnel shredded through his body, exiting in crimson tinged streamers, before embedding itself in the wall behind him. He stood motionless for a second, before his nerve endings cut through the haze of shock.

The Dark Lord hit the ground buried beneath an avalanche of pain, screaming in equal parts agony and rage. Never before had he been so fundamentally hurt, or outsmarted. It appeared that the Potters had placed large amounts of iron fillings, the most magically disruptive element in the world, in front of the discharger. He grew

even more incensed by the knowledge that they had counted on him hammering down the wards.

Before his sub-conscious could mock him ever further for being so deftly outplayed, he slammed his Occulemncy barriers into place, blocking out the idle chatter. He was still alive, due to the protection his Horcruxes provided, but he could still pass out from blood loss. With a distinct lack of enthusiasm, he pulled off his robe.

His torso looked like Swiss cheese, miniature holes peppering his stomach and chest. Chunks of flesh had been punched out of his arms and legs, and a particularly pesky shred of shrapnel had torn off his thumb on the right hand. While he found it fortunate his working hand was still completely intact, there weren't a lot of positives to derive from his present situation.

Moving to prevent further blood loss, he held out his thumb-less hand, and pointed his wand at it. A jet of flame erupted from his wand, cauterizing and sealing the wound site. Resigning himself to how unpleasant this ordeal was going to be, he moved his wand upwards.

After several minutes, all his wounds were taken care of. The bleeding had been staunched, but he had never felt less charitable in his life. He felt like a cut of overcooked steak, his skin alternating between blackened, charred patches and white superficial burns, while the smell of pork clung to him like a parasite. Despite his assurances to Snape, the likelihood of Lily surviving the night was slim.

With a quick jab of his wand, the pockmarked door was thrown violently open. Voldemort stepped through the doorway, wand at the ready. The Mudblood stood before her son's crib, arms splayed wide in a futile protective stance.

"Not Harry! Not Harry! Please-I'll do anything-"

While for a second he contemplated the meaning of anything, and the accompanying humiliation and terror he could wreak upon her, more than anything he wanted this night concluded.

"Stand aside. Stand aside, girl!"

Voldemort's command went unheeded as Potter refused to move.

Her promised chance granted, he raised his wand without hesitation, green light gathered at the tip.

The killing curse struck Lily in the chest. She fell where she stood, hitting the wood floor with a dull thud, lifeless eyes turned to the heavens. The Potter heir starting bawling his eyes out upon his mother's death, fists clenched tight as he screamed.

Voldemort flicked his wand to the right, and Lily's corpse flew to right, hitting the wall with a crunch before landing limbs askew, red hair everywhere. His path to the crib clear, he approached.

Staring down, he felt as if this night was going to be strangely anticlimatic. This child, bound to him by prophecy, was supposed to challenge him? This foul-smelling baby who screamed with reckless abandon, would be the instrument in his defeat? It seemed that even fate would fall before his might.

Upon conclusion of the thought, he pointed his wand at Harry, and cast a jet of deadly green light at the child.

The curse struck the Potter heir on the right side of his forehead. To his astonishment, the curse seemed to diffuse around the child's body, enveloping it in a pale green luminescence, which was steadily growing in intensity. Unintelligible whispers struck his ears, seemingly without source. For the first time in many years, he felt an almost alien emotion tug at him.

Fear.

Frozen, Voldemort saw a bright spot of green begin to spill from Harry's head. As the whispers intensified in volume, the green light carved a shape into the child's forehead, where his initial curse had struck. Scant seconds later, the fully realized shape of a lightning bolt was etched upon his forehead, spilling forth an unearthly green light.

He witnessed the pale green light that had cloaked Harry begin to drain, as if the mark on his forehead was absorbing the residual

magic. The temperature then began to drop, and he felt suction upon his every essence, as if his magic was being drained.

His breath turning to vapor before him, panic struck him. Stumbling backwards, he saw the shining green radiance pouring from the child's head reach a painful intensity, before coalescing into a single point. As he reached the doorway, the light exploded and rushed towards him, a killing curse the magnitude of which seemed impossible.

Moving too quickly to avoid, the stench of death clogging his nostrils, the light struck him. He felt his body, his flesh disintegrate upon contact with the unknown magic, leaving only pain and a faint consciousness behind.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

"What the fuck have I gotten myself into?" Wormtail asked himself, for the third time that night.

It had all been so simple to start. The Dark Lord had given him a choice: betray the Potters or perish. What choice was he given?

With the Potters dead, both Voldemort and he would go to his apartment, in wait for Sirius. Once the Dark Lord had struck down Sirius, they could distort the situation to appear that Pettigrew had killed Black in a moment of rage over the betrayal of his good friends, the Potters. Then Peter could go back to his old life, his debt repaid to the Dark Lord.

Wormtail felt that plan start to go sideways two minutes into the night.

The setup had been perfect, with Voldemort barging through the front door, the Floo being his target. Wormtail had his six Imperioused Muggles under the Mindslave potion, in Death Eater attire, to perform the anti-flight chants. Disillusioned at the forest edge, controlling their vocal cord like some insane conductor overseeing a macabre symphony, he had felt confident.

That is, until he saw the Dark Lord blown clear through the ruined front wall, landing awkwardly on the front lawn. In a pile of black robes lay the Lord he had sworn fealty to, black boots burned off

his feet and the only movement the occasional muscle spasm. While Voldemort did rise after a minute's respite, his Lord's invulnerability seemed to be in question.

Wormtail made his way back to the rear of the house. While the fighting downstairs had stilled, he saw the tell-tale green flashes of the killing curse escaping the window in the hallway. Not being made privy to whatever defenses the Potters had concocted, Wormtail couldn't even venture a guess. Considering the skilled and powerful nature of the Potters though, especially Lily, it was safe to imagine they could have come up with some nasty precautions.

Without warning, the northwest corner of the house exploded, blowing glass and wooden shrapnel into the night sky. Two of the Muggles were cut to ribbons by the flying glass, while another sprayed blood from their severed jugular, their head nearly torn off by a flying doorknob. Snape more than lived up to his Potions Master reputation, as the remaining Muggles had not missed a single syllable.

The raining debris settling into the yard, Wormtail surveying the collateral damage from the forest's edge, a scream of agony and rage rung out from the upper level of the home.

Why was his Lord having such problems with the Potters?

He noticed the screams of pain had been cut out, so he stealthily moved closer to the house. He heard a female voice and his Lord conversing, too far away to discern any words. Their conversation came to an abrupt end with a cold voice intoning a killing curse. Wormtail surmised that the elder Potters were probably all eliminated. All Voldemort had to do was take care of the kid, and perhaps everything would work itself out, albeit in a far more obtuse form than originally conceptualized.

Staring at the open window, Wormtail waited for the final killing curse, awash in self-disgust. Here he was, actively hoping Voldemort was going to kill an innocent child. He spied a flash of green from inside the room, and closed his eyes. Due to his actions, an entire family was dead, of people that had trusted him. He had found it easier to justify himself leading up to his day, but now that it had occurred, all he felt was a crushing self-loathing. Was saving his own skin truly worth the price that had just been paid?

Thought weighing heavily upon his soul, Wormtail spied an eerie green light pulsing out from Harry's room. Was killing Harry not enough for Voldemort? Did he feel it was necessary to further gloat over his victory by performing some sort of ritual? Unconsciously, he began to back away from the house.

He had made it almost back to the tree line when a green light sprang forth from inside the house. It was almost otherworldly in its intensity, and he felt the drain on his soul. Before Wormtail could further ponder the nature of the phenomenon, a second explosion ripped through the upper floor of the house. The upper right floor of the house disintegrated in a flash of green fire, tearing the roof off and raining even more debris into the yard.

Wormtail was indifferent to any further aesthetic damage, as a terrible pain that seemed to reach all the way to his soul, wracked his body. He fell to the ground, arm in agony, clutched close to his chest. Pulling back his sleeve, he was the Dark Mark was inflamed, an angry red instead of the usual obsidian.

Tears clouding his vision, the pain cut out. Nothing like this had ever happened to the Dark Mark. While having no idea how it could possibly be so, he was left with only one conclusion:

Voldemort had been destroyed.

His betrayal had been for nothing. He started to sink into despair, knowing it was only a matter of time before Sirius came after him, a fight he had no chance of winning. Sirius would never stop hunting him, either.

He was broken from his mental anguish by a red glow surrounding the property. The glow intensified, the air itself heavy with magic. With a sudden crack, the magic discharged into the air in a red flash, before disappearing.

"Oh fuck." Wormtail moaned to himself.

The Fidelius anchor had just snapped, the damage to the property unmaking the charm. Anyone could be on their way now. For all he knew, one of the Potters might have been able to send out a final message.

However, then distraction had cut through his self-pity, bringing clarity. If he had any hope of deflecting all reason of suspicion, he had to act swiftly, erasing all evidence that Voldemort had needed any help.

He quickly turned to the Muggles, and cast three successive suffocation curses. Their oxygen depleting, he ordered them to start walking towards the woods. Gasping for air, his marionettes complied, dragging themselves forward in the final thrashes of oxygen deprivation. He summoned the previously killed Muggles, placing them next to their dying compatriots.

Sprinting over to middle of the lawn, he vanished the gore left behind by the Muggles. With a wave of his wand, he transfigured the cooling corpses into leaves, joining the ones that blanketed the back yard.

Calling upon his animagus ability, Wormtail transformed, the ground rushing up to meet him. The transformation complete, he bolted into the woods, keeping to the thick underbrush.

He had only scurried a few hundred yards when he heard movement deeper in the woods. He froze as the sounds of something large approached. Fear froze Wormtail, as the approaching sounds took on the unmistakable crunch of boots moving through the forest. "Shit! The Potters did contact someone!" he thought to himself.

Paralyzed by fear, Wormtail could only hope himself unnoticed. The steps came up right to him, before fading away again. Gingerly opening his eyes, Wormtail spied four people, of indeterminate sex, robed in dark cloaks, hoods pulled tightly around their heads.

Wormtail had never seen attire like this before, but whoever they were; they were headed towards the house. Vaguely wondering what use they could have for the three dead Potters, Wormtail's will to stay alive triumphed, and he continued on his path to reach the boundary of the Apparition wards, so he could get back to his apartment, and wait for Sirius' eventual arrival.

While he did wonder what use they could have for the three dead Potters, his survival was far more important. He continued north,

towards the edge of the Apparition wards, so he could get back to his apartment, the first place Sirius would probably look.

And there Wormtail would be waiting.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Sitting on a stool in the Leaky Cauldron, a temporarily victorious Sirius Black slammed his recently emptied shot glass onto the bar with a large exhale, and then let out his victory taunt.

"What's a matter Hagrid, can't handle your alcohol?"

The subject in question tried to formulate a response, garbled mumbling sneaking out from between his tangles of beard, before crashing forward onto the bar.

"Is he even still alive?" Tom asked, with a look of trepidation upon his face.

Tom's question was answered by Hagrid's snores, which wouldn't have been out of place during the Jurassic period. Sirius broke into loud barks of laughter, the noise echoing throughout the nearly deserted establishment.

Sirius' laughter was abruptly cut off by what sounded like a woman in distress. Taking a quick glance around, he re-confirmed that the bar only held three patrons, and not a single female.

"Sirius!" cried the female voice again, terror coating the three syllables. Where the fuck was it coming from? And why did it sound so familiar?

Realization struck him like a sledgehammer. Lily. The charmed mirrors.

Thrusting his hands into his pockets, he quickly withdrew the mirror, and beheld Lily's panicked face. The terror he saw shredded the haze of alcohol, forcing the world into sharp focus.

"Sirius, he's here! He's found us!"

"Lily, hang on, I'm on my way!"

Lily started to say something, but Sirius threw the mirror aside.

"Tom, Sobriety Potion, now!"

Tom reacted quickly to Sirius' frenzied roar, reaching beneath the counter and withdrawing a small vial, which he tossed to Sirius. Throwing aside the cork, he pounded the potion in one gulp, heedless to the intense pain the accompanied the first few seconds of the alcoholic purge of the bloodstream.

Sirius stormed over to the fireplace, grasping a pile of Floo powder in his fist. Throwing it into the fire, he yelled "Potter Residence!"

To his horror, the flames retained their hue. The Floo connection was destroyed. Spinning around, he marched back to the bar.

"Voldemort's found the Potters!" yelled Sirius at Tom. Heedless to the drain of color from the barkeeper's face, Sirius reached into his robes, withdrawing his motorcycle keys, which he slammed down on the bar.

"Get him some sobriety" said Sirius, gesturing towards Hagrid. He paused, hoping his next words wouldn't come, before continuing "Tell him to meet me at...."

The Fidelius anchor was still up. He couldn't tell Tom where it was. At least Hagrid already knew. "Tell Hagrid to meet me at the Potter's! Then go to the Ministry, get help!"

Sirius didn't wait for a reply, apparating before his last words had faded from the air.

He reappeared with a loud crack, shattering the previously held serenity of the night. Without thought he changed into his Animagus form, and sprinted up the road. He tore down the road, all fear and terror stricken from his mind, as the animal instinct for speed took precedence.

Ten minutes later, the road spread out into the clearing that housed the Potter ancestral home. Sirius changed back into human form thirty feet from the house, and fully took in the destruction with human eyes.

It was a miracle the house was even still standing. The foyer, living room, most of the second floor and the attic were almost completely destroyed. It seemed only Harry's room had been spared on the second floor. Still, there was no Dark Mark floating above the house. He allowed himself to hope that the Potter's had somehow found a way to hold out against Voldemort.

Sirius withdrew his wand, and whispered "Homenum Revilio."

His worst fears were realized as the spell turned up negative. There was not a single living person left within the Potter's home. Voldemort had triumphed.

Tears fell unimpeded from his eyes as he fell to his knees, but he was able to shunt aside his agony, locking his Occlumency barriers into place. He had failed the Potters in life, but perhaps he could do at least one final thing for them.

With an unsteady gait, he made his way to the ruined threshold of the house, into the foyer. Taking in the destruction about him, he felt the stirrings of pride. The Potters had not made it easy for Voldemort.

Upon entry to the living room, the air was pushed from his lungs, as he saw the man who was brother in all but name, split in two. James Potter's eyes had never closed, implying that he had continued to fight until the end, a Gryffindor to the very end. With a wave of his wand, he conjured a white sheet, and lay it gently over his fallen brother.

"Farewell, my brother."

He shambled from to the other rooms on the first floor, taking in the destruction wrought, terrible thoughts forming in his head. Hard as he tried to push it away, it was insistent. He kept on trying to tell himself that Peter had cracked under torture, that he had forcefully betrayed the location of the Potters. He would have to go find Peter after he had provided for his friends....to see if he had survived the torture. His mind wouldn't even acknowledge the other possibility, the one his subconscious continued to push at him.

Finding no other trace of the remaining Potters, he ascended the stairs and went to Harry's room, the probable last stand of the Potter family.

His heartache grew deeper when his glance fell against Lily's crumpled final form, treated like a piece of trash that had been thrown away. He moved over to her still form, and moved her dead weight to the middle of the floor, to lay her down peacefully. He conjured another white sheet for her, wanting to give her the dignity that Voldemort had denied her in death.

Steeling himself, he moved towards the crib. He didn't want to see his dead godson, a child that had never even had the opportunity to grow; damned by a prophecy he had no concept of.

Willing himself forward, he looked down into the crib.

It was empty.

Harry Potter had disappeared.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Author Notes:

I know this got rather tedious at times, not really breaking a great deal of new ground. The first proper chapter will be entirely AU events, so that should be more interesting.

I am in need of a beta, so any interested parties would be encouraged to contact me.

Any comments, suggestions or criticisms would be deeply appreciated. I'll make an effort to answer every review I get.

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Thanks for reading.

First Movement: Disharmonic Convergence

February 3, 1990

It was days like these that Steven Collins hadn't a single regret about becoming a part of the Bedfordshire Constabulary. While he had certainly seen his share of nightmares in his twenty years of service, it was the good days that he tried to always keep at the forefront, where his biggest occurrence would be reprimanding a citizen traveling outside the limits of lawful travel velocity.

The day itself was one of common state in his home county, light grey skies sending forth a minor drizzle, lightly tapping upon the windshield of the police cruiser. While certainly not cold, one would not be comfortable walking around without a jacket.

Noting a sharp curve up ahead, he decelerated, hugging the road at a slow speed. Coming out of the turn, he saw a figure walking on the side of the road. Passing the figure, he couldn't help but notice the stiff, unnatural gait, along with the small stature. As the figure diminished in his rearview, he came to decision.

He brought the car to a stop, glancing both ways to make sure the road was clear, and performed a three-point turn. He traveled back in the opposite direction, stopping the car about a hundred feet in front of the child-sized figure. Opening the door to his Vauxhall Astra cruiser, he stepped out into the slight drizzle.

Closing the door lightly, he directed his gaze to the approaching figure. It appeared to be a young boy, judging by his small size even younger than he had originally estimated, perhaps eight years old. He had jet black hair, plastered to the sides of his head by the precipitation. His gait was stiff, the slow, zombie-like shuffling of someone in shock. He had seen people walking away from car crashes in much the same fashion.

Most unsettling, however, were the boy's eyes. Green orbs shielded by round glasses, the eyes had not blinked once or moved beneath his scrutiny.

Now thirty feet away, Collins noticed that there appeared to be patches on his sweaters and jeans that had been burned away, the

clothes charred black, as well as accompanying smudge marks being slowly washed away, conducive to exposure to smoke.

"Poor little bastard must have just barely escaped a fire." Collins thought to himself. "No telling how badly he's hurt from here."

"Good morning, son." spoke Collins in a light voice, sending out a friendly wave above his head as he walked toward the child. There was no visible reaction, as if he hadn't said anything at all.

Reaching the child, Collins knelt down to his level, placing both hands on his shoulders to keep him in place.

"Are you okay, son?" asked Collins, at equal eye level to the child. The blank look didn't change, but at least he stopped trying to walk, a small sign that he was still capable of feedback from the outside world. It seemed very safe to assume that boy was in shock, probably didn't even feel the burns. Seeking to discover to what degree the boy had been burned, he brought his face in for a closer inspection.

The last thing he expected to find was no damage. The skin was black, not from burns, but from the carbon residue of his torched clothes.

"How the fuck did this kid get off unhurt?" Collins thought to himself. Shaking his thought aside, he tried to get through again.

"Son, what's your name?"

He was glad to see some sort of reaction this time around, as if the kid was making an active attempt to pull himself out of whatever abyss his mind occupied. In a voice barely flung above a whisper, the child replied "Harry Potter"

A common enough last name, though not familiar to anyone he know directly.

"Where are your parents?"

The clarity had slipped away, however. Harry closed his eyes slightly, before beginning to swoon. Who knew how long the child had walked in this catatonic, shock induced state? Deftly scooping

up the child in his arms, he carried him back to the cruiser and placed him in the back seat.

There had been an almost pathetic struggle from the kid when he picked him up, but it had faded as fast as it had come. This child was almost at the end of his tether, exhausted, and seemed comparable in weight to a dried leaf. He saw that the child was practically asleep, so he took off his coat, and covered the child in it. Pulling back, he noticed the child had a pewter pendant on, supported by a thin, black cloth cord around his neck. The pendant appeared to be a many pointed star, inscribed within a circle. While curious about this unknown symbol, he didn't wish to bother the child much further, his exhaustion clear.

"Harry, you get yourself some rest. I'm going to take you to the hospital, have some doctors take a look at you."

The child's eyes jerked wide open at his statement, the shadow of fear clouding his eyes.

"The Legion won't be there, will they?" Harry asked.

Officer Collins hadn't the faintest idea of what the child was talking about. Possibly delirious, but his answer was obvious.

"Harry, I'm not going to let anyone hurt you. I promise."

The boy seemed to accept this, and closed his eyes again, drifting away into sleep almost immediately. Collins closed the door softly, and then took his place behind the wheel. Once again behind the wheel, he reached down to the CB radio, and pulled the microphone off its cradle.

Bringing the microphone to his mouth, he keyed the button.

"This is Bedfordshire Patrol 218, dispatch come in."

After a brief silence, a female voice answered "Go ahead, Patrol 218."

"I found a wandering child along the side of the road, looks like he got caught in a fire. Have you had any reports of missing children, or fires from anywhere in the county?"

"We don't have anything; it's been a quiet day over here."

"Okay, I'm going to run him over to Luton & Dunstable, have him checked out. Thanks anyway, dispatch. Patrol 218 out."

He replaced the microphone on the cradle, deep in thought. Bedfordshire was not a large county. If a fire of some sort had occurred, they would have known about it. He was in the heart of the county, so he felt very confident in crossing off the idea that Harry had walked from another country, the distance being far too great for someone of his stature. Also, the carbon residue hadn't been completely washed away by the rain, suggesting he couldn't have been walking for that long a time.

No closer to the truth, Collins put the car in drive, pulling away from the spot where he had found the youngster. Where the bloody fuck had this kid come from? It was like the he had just arrived from nowhere, a thought that was downright loony, batshit crazy, completely impossible.

Wasn't it?

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

July 2, 1990

"Come on in, dear."

At the behest of the pleasant sounding female voice, Nymphadora Tonks grasped the brass knob, and let herself into the office. Stepping through the threshold, she found the decorum of the office to be exactly to her tastes: Chaotic.

The true color of the office wall could hardly be determined, as papers had been attached to every visible surface. Large maps of England, animated photographs, still Muggle photos and various other papers dominated the wall. Odd stacks of paper lay in random piles about the floor, like some sort of minefield of paperwork. The desk seemed to be the only thing clean, at least in relation to the rest of the office. The middle third of the desk had been cleaned, displaying only a solitary file, a single plaque located at the front:

Charlotte Lewis – Director of Muggleborn Education

The person to which the plaque referred to stepped from behind the desk, making her way to Tonks with her right hand outstretched. She was a middle-aged witch with dull brown hair, lazily pulled back into a pony tail that reached down to the middle of her back. She wore dark blue robes that while clean, were slightly wrinkled.

"Welcome Miss Tonks, I trust that you found the office alright?" the director asked with a slight smile upon her face.

It hadn't been very difficult, being on the Department of Magical Law Enforcement Level, in the complete opposite direction of the Auror offices, where most of the smaller, ancillary offices were located.

"It wasn't a problem. Thanks for having me by, Mrs. Lewis."

The director waved the thanks off, while motioning her to sit in one of the two wooden chairs in front of the desk. "It's a pleasure helping out someone with the last name Tonks."

Seated, the director waited for Nymphadora to sit before she continued.

"As I'm confident you've heard from your father, I was quite friendly with him during my time at Hogwarts. I was a year behind him, and he was kind to me, a scared child that had only first heard of magic a few months prior. He saw me, nearly shaking in fear during the Sorting, and invited me to sit next to him after I had been sorted."

That sounded exactly like the sagacious man she knew her father to be.

"For Muggleborns such as myself, the first few months of Hogwarts are only as pleasant as your classmates are. With people such as your father, and other Hufflepuff students, my personal transition was easy."

"My dad has always tried to put a smile on people's faces" Tonks offered.

"Yes, he did. I wish that all Hogwarts Muggleborn students were as fortunate to have had someone like him around, but not all were as lucky."

Tonks shuddered to think what it must be like for any Muggleborns that get sorted into Slytherin.

"I'm sorry; I've started to ramble again. If I do it again, feel free to interrupt me and get back on track. A stinging hex should be adequate."

Both women smiled. Tonks thought she was going to get along with her new boss fine.

"So, do you mind if I call you Nymphadora?"

Tonks couldn't help from making a face. "If you don't mind, please just call me Tonks. I'm not really fond of my mother's choice in name." While under normal circumstances she would have behaved in a more formal fashion, Charlotte seemed to exude a relaxed, laid-back atmosphere.

"Alright, Miss Tonks, what made you decide to seek employment at the Ministry, as opposed to lounging about before your Auror training begins?"

Tonks thought for a moment, organizing her thoughts, before starting.

"From what I've read, there are a lot of politics that come with the Auror position. Understanding the Ministry itself, who's connected to whom and such. I asked my parents if they had any contacts at the Ministry that may have use for an intern. I figure, I'm not that politically savvy, so any insider knowledge I can get will probably help with my career, and it will keep me from getting too bored this summer."

Charlotte was silent for a second, before replying "Not really the standard reply I get from any prospective interns, but at least I know you're not going to be kissing my ass all summer."

Tonks gave a little laugh at the director's analysis.

"There are probably several other internships you could have applied for, Miss Tonks. Why did you apply for this one?"

"There's a few reasons. Firstly, the Muggle world has always fascinated me, from the odd things I've heard from my dad. I'd like to see some of it first-hand, to see the strange world that my dad came from."

Charlotte nodded, prompting her to continue.

"My dad mentioned that my abilities would come in very handy here. I don't know how, as I'm still not sure how this job works, but it'd be nice to put my ability to use by genuinely helping people out, as opposed for pranking and my own entertainment."

"What skills would those be?"

Scrunching her nose in concentration, Tonks changed her form. Her bright pink hair darkened to a dull brown as she rearranged her facial features. Seconds later, the director's eyes were wide with amazement, her doppelganger staring right back at her.

"My father probably forgot to mention that I'm a metamorphmagus." observed Tonks, an amused note hanging over her words.

Slowly awakening from her amazement, Mrs. Lewis replied "Yes, he did neglect to mention that."

She was then silent for a while, staring deeply at Tonks. As the moments stretched, Tonks started to fidget. Perhaps she had made a mistake, being a bit too brash about her abilities. She braced herself for the worst when the director cleared her throat to speak again.

"I was originally going to offer you a paper-pushing job, something rather boring that would introduce you to the Ministerial bureaucracy. However, in light of your abilities, I've changed me mind. How would you like a much more active position, with actual field work?"

Tonks' mood quickly switched from apprehension to glee. Still learning a lot while not having to sit behind a desk? "Sign me up" she thought to herself.

"Yeah, I'd be very interested in more exciting work. What would I be doing?"

Charlotte chuckled slightly.

"Perhaps I should actually tell you what the position would entail before you make a decision. What do you know about this department?"

"Not that much. I know that you find Muggleborns and send them their Hogwarts letters. I think you do some other things, but I'm not sure what."

"That is correct; we do have the responsibility of finding the Muggleborns that pepper England. That's our main duty, but we also help Muggleborns find jobs in the Wizarding World, and provide them with answers to any questions about the Wizarding world that they may have."

Charlotte paused to take a sip of water from the glass on her desk, before continuing.

"At the heart of the DMLE is a large map of England. It monitors the entire country, recording and tracking every single piece of magical release performed within England."

Tonks was surprised. She found the thought of the Ministry tracking every bit of magic rather invasive.

"Are there any ways to avoid detection?"

"Yes, the system's not perfect. It doesn't work in areas of high magical concentrations, such as Diagon Alley, Hogwarts and Hogsmeade. There are also specialized wards that can be used to cloak magical readings, which are illegal, but it's hardly ever prosecuted."

Charlotte must have seen something in her face.

"I'm not a huge proponent of the system, but the paranoid fervor that swept England after You-Know-Who's disappearance allowed for the DMLE and the entire Ministry in general to expand the scope of

their powers. What was originally only used as a tool to track Muggleborns expanded into a country-wide monitoring system."

Charlotte stopped talking then. It looked like she was about to start again, but instead she let out a heavy sigh.

"Listen to me, ranting again. To get back on subject, the DMLE also tracks accidental magic. Their department tracks locations and times of accidental magic, and sends us reports."

She heard the slight frustration in Charlotte's voice. Any information she received was probably filtered, the bare minimum for her to perform her job.

"Which brings us to my department. Our job is to use the reports to pinpoint the location of said underage wizards performing accidental magic, and to find out information about them. Who they are, where they live, basic information. Once we get their information, we can pass it on to Hogwarts, to make sure Muggleborn wizards receive their letters."

Tonks was surprised; having no idea the method of finding Muggleborns was this involved. She supposed it did make sense, however. It's not like there was just some magical quill that dictated the birth of Muggleborns.

"As you can well imagine, our information gathering required a bit of a covert angle. It's mostly simple "observe and report" situations, with an occasional tougher case. It does require a great deal of interaction with the Muggle world, which many take exception to, but you didn't have a problem with."

She nodded her assertion, which seemed to please her prospective boss.

"Of course, there is a lot more to it, which I'll get to at a later eventually. Before I continue, though, I want to say that I'm fond of you so far. If you're interested in field work, your abilities would be a great asset to us. We'd give you a few weeks of training in tracking methods and the Muggle world; we wouldn't just throw you to the wolves. That being said, would you like to work for us this summer?"

Tonks didn't even have to consider it.

"I would love to."

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

August 10, 1990

The headmaster of Hogwarts sat behind his desk, long fingers delicately rubbing his temples, contemplating taking another headache potion. One of the sources lay before him, his attempts to balance the budget for the upcoming term. Another was placed off to the side, a stack of unopened letters from the Hogwarts Board of Governors, who certainly held to different educational ideals than he did.

When fighting the war, Albus had imagined that the end of the war would herald a new age, where the heavy, oppressive cloak of war had been cast aside. Alas, his hopes went unfulfilled.

The Wizarding War had ended unresolved. There was no closure, with both Harry Potter and Voldemort merely disappearing. With no clear resolution, the tide of fear never truly retreated, the dark cloud that had hung over Wizarding society never truly parted. In place of celebration, there had been nervous whispers.

What happened to the Dark Lord? How had he been defeated? What happened to Harry Potter? Was the Dark Lord even truly defeated?

Fear spread throughout the Wizarding World, despite the complete lack of Death Eater attacks. The politicians didn't let this occasion pass by. With the support of a paranoid public, the role and power base of the Ministry of Magic expanded. Departments were expanded, new departments were created, laws passed with fanfare.

Yet through it all, nothing was actually accomplished other than largely increasing the size of the English Wizarding bureaucracy. Many newly created departments clashed with one another, the lines of jurisdiction now blurred. While never a model of efficiency, the new Wizarding government stood as a shining monument to incompetence and corruption, headed by Minister Cornelius Fudge.

They had even tried to meddle with Hogwarts. The Board of Governors had been expanded, their powers increased. They now had the power to appoint professors, which had proved a constant source of aggravation for him. It was a daily power struggle, and the wear was beginning to show.

However, the most pressing issue had yet to enter his office. Not ten minutes ago, the normally blank canvas was filled by the raven-haired form of the deceased Potions Master Hesper Starkey, to confirm that Dumbledore was in his office. Hesper informed him Severus was on his way up, and that he was in a state of distress. The message delivered, the shade returned to its normal portrait in Severus's office, the personal messenger between the two educators.

While he didn't have the faintest idea what could have upset his Potions Master, it most likely wasn't a trivial matter if Severus wanted to talk to him. While there were many an unpleasant adjective to describe his educational companion, needlessly worrying wasn't a trait he possessed.

The grinding sound that accompanied the Gargoyle's movements alerted the Headmaster that his meeting was to start. He lowered his hands from his temples, folded his fingers on top of the desk, and waited.

Severus Snape swept into the room with his dark robes billowing about him, as if strewn by an unseen wind. Dumbledore mused that, even in distress, his Potions Master didn't let the theatrics slide. Once in the room, he began to rapidly pace back and forth in front of the desk, face pointed to the ground, apparently in deep concentration.

The Headmaster stayed silent. He found it best not to push Severus, as he would speak when he was ready to.

After several passes, Severus stopped, flinging a gaze in his direction. Dumbledore saw confusion in it, and one that was almost alien upon his Potion Master's features.

Fear.

"Albus, did you, at any point, ever believe that the Dark Lord was truly gone?"

"It has always been my estimation that he would one day return. How, or in what form I could only form a vague guess. What prompted this line of questioning, Severus?"

Ignoring the question, his Potions Master continued on.

"I sometimes wonder what may have happened had Voldemort not been defeated that night. Would I still be content to lick the heels of a delusional lunatic, one who had murdered the only person I had ever cared for?"

The Head of Slytherin paused, his face clouded by the ghost of recollection.

"I've always told myself that I would have left his service. That I would have sought you out, prostrated myself before you, and renounced my service to the Dark Lord."

Dumbledore had indeed wondered this himself, though he didn't see the correlation to any recent events. Staying silent, he waited for Severus to continue.

"Last night, for the first time in almost ten years, the Dark Mark awakened."

His closest confidant let the moment expand, giving Dumbledore's racing mind time to organize its thoughts. Untold questions flowed, each demanding to be asked. However, his inquisitive nature would not serve him best right now, as Severus' next words would most likely prove more informative than any inquiry.

"As you are well aware, the Dark Mark acts as a conduit to every Death Eater, each conduit being linked together. With time, every Death Eater eventually realized the versatility of the Dark Lord's creation, and the wide spectrum of impressions he could send forth. When Sirius Black informed him of the Potters' location, he sent the satisfaction through our arms, the promise of ultimate victory. When the Longbottoms and Hestia Jones escaped his ambush at the Fenwick residence, we all felt the oppressive weight of his displeasure."

Snape's eyes stared ahead, seeing nothing but the past.

"In some ways, the Dark Lord is an artist. His canvas is pain. When the brand upon my arm awakened last night, it was in a fashion that I had never experienced. I believe that however the Dark Mark works, it's tied directly to the Dark Lord's magic. What I felt last night..."

Severus paused before continuing, trying to form the words properly.

"...the power behind it was but a shade of its former potency. Whatever form he resides in now, he's weak. Perhaps even in a vulnerable state. What I felt last night was a reminder of allegiance, a call to arms."

Snape's voice grew graver, dropping to a whisper, as if Voldemort himself were eavesdropping upon their conversation.

"He seeks a return, for his servants to restore him to his former glory."

Both men were silent at the conclusion of Snape's statement. Dumbledore's mind raced with questions, but there was one that was most pertinent above all.

"Severus, can Voldemort manipulate the Dark Mark by himself?"

Snape exhaled deeply, with a heavy sigh.

"No."

Dumbledore felt the years weigh upon him as Snape's words fell. It was starting again. He could only hope they would all be better prepared this time around.

"Would you have me keep an ear to the ground?" asked Snape, his voice full of weariness.

"I would. We haven't the faintest idea who is in contact with Voldemort right now, or how wide their network extends."

Dumbledore received no complaint from Snape. It was unsaid between the two men, but actively moving against the force of Voldemort should they reappear was the penance that he required to protect the former Death Eater from prosecution.

"I still am in occasional contact with the Malfoy, Nott and Parkinson elders. I will arrange to meet them as soon as possible, to divine both their intentions and if they are Voldemort's current contact."

He nodded once, approving of the plan. Without speaking, his companion rose out of his chair, heading for the door.

"Thank you, Severus."

His words froze the Potions Master, who turned back briefly. In that quick gaze, Albus saw the fear that had been festering, of actively spying and working against his former cohorts. It spoke of ten years of anguish, of bad decisions which led to worse ones. The face of a man condemned, damned, but not done fighting.

The flash left as swiftly as it arrived, the longest glance one ever receives into the soul of one so accomplished at Occlumency. He descended down the stairs without a second look back, out of Dumbledore's line of sight. The grinding of stone sliding against stone told him he was once again alone, the gargoyle allowing him egress.

His guest departed, he allowed his thoughts to wander.

Foolish it may have been, but he had held out a distant hope that the contents of the prophecy had already been fulfilled. Due to a few carefully spent Galleons, he had a few contacts among the Goblin banking workforce, and had learned a great deal.

In the Wizarding world, vaults in Gringotts were tied to their respective bloodlines, the very spells and enchantments protecting the vaults literally forged from the blood of the family. When a particular family's bloodline has been extinguished, the bond breaks, the magic governing the vault dissolved. Chaos usually ensues, with complex and arcane litigation mandating the rightful successor to the vault's wealth.

Though it had taken time, Dumbledore had eventually discovered that the magic protecting the Potter vault was completely intact. Somewhere, somehow, Harry Potter was still alive.

Upon discovering this, he had been at a loss. He had assumed the prophecy had been fulfilled with the final explosion that had destroyed almost the entire Potter ancestral home, both Harry and Voldemort dead. An incredible tragedy, but at least one served a purpose, unlike the thousands of atrocities that occurred every day. He would have given his life without hesitation if it meant the destruction of Voldemort. Fate, however, was not interested in what he wanted. It often was bloodthirsty for the lives of the innocent.

He had not alerted the Wizarding world that Harry Potter was still alive. Without actual proof to present to the, the public would be skeptical of his claims.

He had searched far and wide for him. Owls came back frustrated, delivery parcels still in talon. Wherever Harry was, he was completely hidden.

As he often did, his mind wandered back to 1981. He had searched the Potter residence after that fateful night. An immense amount of magic had been discharged that night. Taking inventory of the magical spells flung between adversaries, Dumbledore felt a large measure of pride for his two Gryffindors. The odds may have been high, but they didn't let that prevent them from trying. Of particular interest to him was Harry's old room.

Dumbledore had felt the magic there, and it had been nothing like he had ever experienced. The magical imprints left behind spoke of the complex runes Lily had used, giving him a vague idea of the ritual she had decided upon. While the particulars were not clear, judging by the rune imprint, she had bartered her life for that of her son's. He imagined that the protection had deflected the killing curse Voldemort had used upon Harry back at him.

Everything after this event, however, he was at a loss to reconstruct.

How did Voldemort continue to exist? Based upon his investigations, the body of Voldemort had literally been disintegrated, only spare bits of cloth and blood matching that found on the front lawn, kitchen and dining room. There were many different Dark rituals available to

those who wished to protect themselves, but nothing that would preserve a body after being obliterated.

That was, if Voldemort even possessed his own body anymore. Perhaps his body had never been restored, but had found a way to somehow anchor his soul to this world...

Dumbledore straightened up, his mind coming to a hideous conclusion. The Dark Lord was certainly not above murder. Could the conversation Tom Riddle had with Horace during the Slug Club meeting been more than a hypothetical question?

During the first war, he had done extensive research into the life of Tom Riddle, trying to find every single bit of information he could, anything that could have granted him just the slightest of advantages. While people willing to share memories of the former Slytherin Prefect were rare, he had persuaded some, Horace Slughorn among them.

All traces of fatigue gone, Albus jumped up. Reaching behind him, he opened a wooden cabinet, revealing his Pensieve. He ran his fingers along the carvings on the side of the stone basin, before bringing his wand tip to this temple, withdrawing a silvery strand of memory. He dropped it into the basin, where it swirled with an ethereal glow.

Without hesitation, Albus lowered his head into the silvery pool, once again descending into the depths of the past, where hopefully he had overlooked some small detail that would explain what why Voldemort was back, and what he could do to stop him.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

August 20, 1990

A mere two weeks away from Auror training, Nymphodora Tonks found herself again reflecting on how well the summer had gone. While what she was doing was technically work, it didn't always feel like it. Her ventures off into the Muggle world had seemed more like excursions to parallel dimensions. She had found a deeper, more profound appreciation for the odd things her father had sometimes mentioned, forgetting he was the sole family member who would understand the reference.

Beyond her new daily experiences that the Muggle world provided, she found she was good at her job. She had no need for the elaborate disguises or appearance-altering potions that her colleagues depended upon. While Muggle clothing had been awkward at first, Muggle dress was one of the first subjects her training tackled, and soon it had become second nature. She was almost in awe of the various clothing innovations Muggles had come up with, which forged a newfound sense of how prudish her own robes were. In their world, the female body seemed to be something to be cherished, to be admired, which was in sharp contrast to the conservative viewpoints that common Witch dress implied.

Her assignments usually included staking out a particular place of residence that had shown up on the grid as containing a user of accidental magic. While no two stakeouts were exactly the same, she typically could just disillusion herself, observe the family for the day, and draw the correct conclusion from the daily interactions. At first she had found it odd to be almost spying on people, but her unease lessened with each job. All that was required of her was to identify the user of accidental magic, the Ministry didn't require anything above that, she, Tonks, often told herself that at least she was betraying anyone's secrets.

It had also allowed her to put work into her special abilities. While she could change her appearance at will, an exterior change didn't tend to mean a great deal unless the mannerisms and movements matched the personality she was attempting to mimic. While it had been slow work, she felt she was actually becoming proficient at slipping into the lives of others. She currently had taken the form of her boss, Mrs. Lewis, who did have occasional interactions with Muggle Social Services. For this task, she would need a somewhat established persona.

Her current assignment was more complex than her previous ones, probably only given to her due to how efficient she was with previous ones. With a gaze upwards, she beheld the rusted ironwork which framed the property, which decades ago may have been painted black. In the center of the fence lay a large, padlocked gate, in the same state of disrepair as the rest of the fence. To the right of the gate lay a more modern looking dull green steel door, cut directly into the old fence. While Tonks understood the need for ease of

access, it was an aesthetic nightmare to behold, very ugly and cheap looking.

Making her way to the door, she grasped the dull grey knob, only to find it wouldn't turn beneath her hand. "Is this a orphanage or a prison?" Tonks grumbled to herself. She then noticed a small white button to the right of the door. "Does that button open the door?" she wondered to herself. With only one way to find out, she pushed the button, then tried the handle again, which still wouldn't move.

"Great. What do I do now?" Tonks grumbled to herself, flinging a slightly venomous glare at the door.

Tonks moved her face closer to the button, in an attempt to discern what it was for. With her face inches from it, a loud, hungry noise emanated from it, followed by an amplified woman's voice asking "Hello?"

She screamed, jumping backwards in fear. What kind of Muggle magic was this? It almost sounded like some demon or something. Should she run? Then again, why was a demon taking the time to greet her?

"Is anyone there?" the female voice blasted again, a hint of annoyance beneath it. Tonks noticed the voice seemed to come from a small, grated piece of black wall above the button. Maybe it was some sort of strange Muggle communication device?

Moving carefully towards the spot she had jumped back from, she lowered her face and yelled "Hello!" into the grated piece.

No response met her yelled greeting. Was she using it right?

"Is anyone there?" the voice asked again, no longer masking its frustration.

Tonks brought her flushed face closer to the grating, her lips close enough to kiss it, and repeated her greeting. After a brief silence, the voice repeated its previous question, laced with even more contempt than before. Tonks slammed her fist against the wall, unable to contain her frustration, her first striking the button.

"I'm right here, you idiot!" Tonks yelled scathingly. Were all Muggle orphanages such impenetrable fortresses?

"What do you want?" the voice immediately replied in a cold tone of voice.

Whoops. How did the voice hear her this time? Maybe you had to hit the button and talk at the same time?

With a swiftly reddening face, Tonks lowered her face to the grating and pressed the button.

"I'm sorry about the previous tantrum; this thing doesn't seem to be working very well. I didn't mean that you were an idiot, I mean this stupid machine. I'm sure you're smart and such."

Her complexion deepened even further after her explanation. Was she going to do anything right today?

"It's okay, there's always something going wrong with our speaker. What can we do for you today?"

The voice had thawed slightly, Tonks was relieved to note.

"I'm Mrs. Lewis, from the department of Social Services; I had an appointment with Director Cole today, for 3 o' clock."

"Ah, okay. Sorry about the malfunctioning speakers, they never seem to work right. I'll buzz you in."

True to the voice's word, an angry buzzing noise started within the door. Tonks initially recoiled, before once again grasping the doorway. She felt relieved when the knob finally moved, letting her into the courtyard. Why did Muggle devices have to be so loud? In her humble opinion, the Weird Sisters were the only thing that should occur at high volume.

Well, at the very least, the gatekeeper woman had taken her ignorance for a problem on her end. While not a good sign that she had screwed up the first part of the assignment, at least she wouldn't be facing any repercussion for her mistake.

Entering the bare courtyard, she beheld the cracked concrete that made up the enclosed area, the odd weed cropping up between. Towering above the yard, like a looming parent of a disobedient child, was a square concrete building. She shuddered slightly at the sight, feeling extremely grateful that she had been fortunate enough to grow up in a warm home.

Ascending the cracked steps, she entered the slightly warped wooden door. Beyond lay a sparsely furnished, but spotlessly clean foyer. While certainly grim from the outside, it seemed like the people running the place had made an effort to make the interior more warm, with child's artwork adorning the dull walls, the children's own art museum.

Before she had a chance to examine any of the artwork, she was approached by a short woman with long, blonde hair tied back into a ponytail.

"You must be Mrs. Lewis" the woman remarked, before continuing "I'm Diane, the closest thing we have to a secretary here."

"Correct. Pleased to meet you, Diane."

"I'll show you to Mrs. Cole's office."

Tonks followed behind the woman, passing down a corridor. Children of all ages peeked out from different rooms. All looked well cared for, which did warm her heart, even if it had nothing to do with her being here. In such a cruel world, it was nice to see that at least some people had taken it upon themselves to make sure these children had a chance.

Her guide stopped before the door at the end of the hall, knocking loudly upon it. She didn't wait for a response, opening the door and sticking her head in.

"Mrs. Lewis is here to see you."

Tonks didn't hear a reply, but Diane beckoned her forward regardless. She gave a polite nod to the woman, before stepping into the office, closing the door behind her.

Sitting behind a desk was one of the oldest women Tonks had ever seen. She seemed frail to the point of being vulnerable to a sudden gust of wind, her skin literally hanging off her frame. However, the eyes blazed with a cold vitality, blue chips of ice that almost made her feel as small as a child.

With a fluidity and grace unspoken by her appearance, Mrs. Cole rose to her feet, extending her right arm. Tonks met it with her own hand, shaking it quickly. She had a slight moment where she had to hide her surprise, the grip being far stronger than she had envisioned.

"Good to see you again, Charlotte. Please, have a seat."

"Thank you, Mrs. Cole" she replied, complying with the request.

"As I've frequently told you, we're too familiar with one another to be so formal, please call me Mary."

Tonks mused to herself that at least she would be able to spare herself the embarrassment of trying to guess her first name.

"As you wish, Mary. It's been a few years, how has life been treating you as of late?"

"The same old: the government continually being tight-fisted with its under-privileged youth, but throwing money at its armed forces; trying to run this place on a shoe-string budget; dealing with all the factions of morons trying to force me out of here, claiming I'm too old to work."

"I wouldn't worry about that too much Mary, I'm sure you'll outlive all your naysayers."

The director gave a rasped chuckle in response.

"Sometimes, I think you're right. Others, I feel every bit my eighty-two years. Regardless, what brings you to my orphanage today?"

The truth was an orphanage was one of the hardest places to find Muggleborns, since the monitoring system wasn't exact enough to pinpoint more than a general location. With many children inhabiting them, it often made finding the correct child difficult. Charlotte

suggested she go through the list of children, see if by chance, she got lucky and a familiar name surfaced, making her job easier.

"Well, I need a roster list of every child here."

"Why would you need that? Aren't you here to audit this orphanage, to assure Social Services the government's money is being spent well?"

With an inward pang of regret, Tonks subtly lowered her right arm, withdrawing her wand that had been hidden up her sleeve. With a whisper of "Confundo", the yellow spell left her wand, traveling beneath the desk and hitting Mrs. Cole in the leg.

The director, who had opened her mouth to ask what Tonks had whispered, stopped mid-action. Her eyes took on a slightly glazed look. The Confundus charm was completely without physical risk or harm, but that didn't make her feel any better about using it on a defense-less woman. Unfortunately, age had not dulled her perceptiveness, so there would have been no way for Tonks to get the information she needed without blowing her cover.

A deep breath taken, Tonks proceeded.

"Mary, could you please grab the roster for me?"

"Yes, certainly." Mrs. Cole replied as she reached into a drawer and pulled out a sheet of paper. She handed it over for her "friend's" scrutiny.

Tonks took it gently, turning it towards her and scanning the alphabetized list with a careful eye. She found that none of the names jumped out at her. She had almost resigned herself to having to meet each child individually when a name caught her eye.

"It couldn't be, could it?" she thought to herself, her eyes moving back to the name that had stopped her. She found that it apparently could be, as her breath hitched in her throat, one of the most discussed names in the Wizarding world staring back at her, three-quarters of the way down the list.

Harry Potter. Age ten.

While a flurry of thought had overcome her, one clamored louder than the rest:

How the fuck had the potential savior of the Wizarding world ended up alive, in a Muggle orphanage?

Not bothering to keep the excitement out of her voice, she addressed the Confounded woman.

"What can you tell me about Harry Potter?"

She completely failed at keeping the excitement out of her voice, but luckily the befuddled woman didn't seem to notice.

"Harry Potter, eh? Certainly an odd case. He was found wandering around Bedfordshire county about six months ago, on a lonely road. Gave his name, before collapsing from exhaustion. Who knows how long the poor child had been walking? Seemed to have been caught in some sort of fire, but almost miraculously didn't get burned. Police found him, took him to the hospital, where he checked out fine, physically anyway."

A sad look fitted onto the director's features at that time, something almost unheard of for a Muggle under the Confundus Charm.

"The young ones, they sometimes see things that are so horrible, their mind just shuts down. There were no reported fires around the area Harry was found, nor any reports of missing children. Whatever happened to him, it must have been terrible, as he was nearly catatonic when he came here. No one could get a single word out of him, and with no missing children reports...he had no place else to go."

"After about three months, he began to come out of his shell a little. He still won't talk very much, but he'll at least reply when you ask him questions. It's odd, he's respectful, but he'll never volunteer information. He claims that he has no memories prior to coming here, and it seems plausible, as I've heard of that happening before with children who have experienced extreme mental trauma. Yet, I can't help but feel he knows more than what he's saying. He almost reminds me of a child that grew up here about fifty years ago, a boy named Tom Riddle. Never did find out what happened to him once he left here."

While Tonks hadn't the faintest idea who Tom Riddle was, the rest perplexed her. Harry obviously hadn't grown up here. Where had he been for the ten years prior to this? She left her own thoughts to her machinations, refocusing upon Mrs. Cole, who had just continued on.

"...him, though I haven't the faintest idea why. Even if he is slightly odd, I've never seen him harm anyone else. Some of the younger kids claim he can talk to animals, which is obviously ridiculous. He has snuck out a few times, but that's been the only time he's ever disobeyed our rules."

She had missed the first part of the sentence, lost in her own thoughts, but decided it probably wasn't important enough to ask for a repeat. Rising to her feet, she got the directions to Harry's room, and rose to leave the room.

She turned her head back at the door's threshold.

"Now Mary, you've been very helpful, but as it turned out, we didn't really have a great deal to discuss. I'm going to pay Harry a visit, then I'll be on my way."

"You're welcome, dear" Mrs. Cole replied, her voice still slightly dazed. Tonks cancelled the spell as she left the office, making her way to Harry Potter's room.

She couldn't believe it! On what seemed like an ordinary day, she may have solved one of the largest unsolved mysteries of the Wizarding world. It would be the biggest news story since Sirius Black's imprisonment.

Before she realized it, she found herself before the door to the room that housed the missing wizard. Taking a deep breath to compose herself, she knocked upon the door. She didn't hear an answer, but she heard a shifting sound on the bed inside. She knocked again, harder. This time, a quiet voice answered.

"Come in."

She opened the door to let herself in, turning to close it behind her. With her back to the child, she cast a quick Privacy Charm with a whisper of "Regio Arcanum".

Before she could turn back around to address Harry, he spoke again, asking "Who are you?" in a quiet tone.

Turning around, she caught her first glimpse of Harry Potter.

He was small for his age, thin, wiry. He had dark green eyes, unlike the bright green ones she had seen in pictures of Lily Potter. His mid-length black hair was parted neatly in the middle, his raven locks combed to either side. So unlike what James Potter had looked like. An odd scar lay upon his forehead, which almost looked like a lightning bolt.

"I'm Mrs. Smith, from the department of Social Services. You must be Harry Potter."

"What were you whispering when you came in?" Harry asked, with a slight hint of curiosity in his voice.

"Shit" she thought to herself. He must have heard her whisper the Privacy Charm. Too bad she never had much skill with silent casting. Before replying, she sat herself in the chair that lay against the opposite wall.

"I was just talking to myself, nothing important."

Tonks inwardly groaned after her statement. Was that really the best she could do?

Harry regarded her with a deserved questioning gaze, before shaking his head slightly. She felt oddly quelled after his reaction. Wasn't she the adult here?

"Have I done anything wrong?"

"No, of course not. The department just sent me here to make sure you were getting along fine, and to see if you had remembered anything."

"It's fine here. Slightly boring, but that's okay. I still don't remember anything...from before."

"Not a single thing, Harry?"

Harry gazed at her, his dark green orbs surprisingly cold for someone so young.

"If I had any information about my past to give you people, do you think that I would still be here?" Harry asked rhetorically, as if he was talking down to her. Tonks was baffled. How was a ten year-old able to exude such a sense of superiority over her, and be so convincing?

She had also run through her script pretty quickly. What else was she supposed to say to this kid, who made her feel even smaller than him? Gazing quickly about the room, she took in its sparse décor. A bureau. A single wooden chair. An iron bed, upon which Harry sat. Not much conversation material here. She did, however, notice a large ring upon his left thumb, too large to fit around his finger, with a black stone set into it.

"That's a nice ring you have there, Harry."

"Thanks" he replied.

"Can I see it?"

"Sure" he replied, reaching out with his hand and presenting the ring for her scrutiny.

She got up, and moved closer, delicately taking Harry's pale hand in her own, inspecting the ring. It was roughly made out of what appeared to be gold. She supposed the jewel was onyx, but couldn't be sure. It looked like there was a faded coat of arms engraved onto the base of the jewel. She brought her head closer, wanting to get a better look. The coat of arms almost looked familiar.

Her only warning a quick blurred movement, she felt something sharp penetrate her throat with a rough tear. With a confused glance down, she saw Harry's right hand move away from a handle that protruded from her throat.

She went to ask Harry what he was doing, but all that emerged was a wet gurgle. Her hands went to the handle, and she felt the blood from her punctured jugular vein splashing her hands.

Still in shock, Tonks wondered if the little fucker had just stabbed her. She had only the time to make the first movements towards her wand before Harry ran at her, full speed. Head lowered, he crashed into her stomach, drawing a deep cough which sprayed forth a bloody mist. The impact knocked her backwards into the chair she had been sitting in. She tripped backwards the small chair, the back of her head colliding with the wooden floor.

The blunt impact hurt like a bastard, but brought a form of clarity. With a deft movement, she cancelled the Privacy Charm upon the door. She turned her arm to point her wand at Harry, but he moved too quickly, slamming his heel upon her wrist, pinning it to the floor. With his other foot he kicked away the wand from her limp fingers, where it clattered against the rear wall, far beyond her reach.

She opened her mouth too scream, only to have Harry roughly shove a pillow over her face, his entire weight placed atop the pillow. She tried to struggle, to pull him off, but the heavy blood loss weakened her attempts vastly. A new wave of pain washed over her as she felt Harry roughly withdraw the blade from her throat, and roughly hacked at her head, crudely scalping her. Her renewed screams were completely muffled by the pillow pressed over her head.

As the seconds lengthened, her resistance grew weaker. Her assumed form slipped away, leaving only the terrified, tear tracked face of an innocent teenager. Bit by bit, her struggles trickled to stillness. With the must of old feathers in her nose, in a never-ending world of white, Nymphodora Tonks died.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry Potter waited several minutes before he withdrew the pillow from Nymphadora Tonks' cooling form, revealing her face frozen in a silent scream. With her confirmed dead, he collapsed on the floor, allowing himself a few moments to relax his aching muscles. How he hated being confined to a child's body.

After several minutes, he rose, ignoring the sharp protest of his still-developing musculature. He moved over to where the metamorphmagus' wand lay, and picked it up. It appeared to be made from willow, about nine inches long, a poorly made wand for a poor excuse for a witch. As if he hadn't heard her cast a privacy

charm on the room upon entering. Her acting couldn't have fooled a child, much less someone in his unique situation.

He pointed his wand at the door, and cast another Privacy Charm, before moving over to his bureau. He opened the top drawer, revealing a row of neatly folded white shirts. He threw them carelessly over his shoulder, leaving a bare expanse of wood. Reaching down, he slipped the bloodstained knife into the wood, using it as a crowbar to pop out the false bottom of the drawer. He lifted up the false bottom, and then threw it aside, revealing the contents of the hidden compartment.

Without looking, he reached his hand around one of the smaller circles of bone, and pulled it out. It bore a carving of a Germanic rune, which roughly translated to disappear. After giving it a brief look, he placed it on the floor in one of the corners of the room. He went back and withdrew three similar circles, placing them in the other corners of the square room. His servant had not failed him in procuring cloaking stones.

He went back to the drawer for a third time, pulling out an activation rune. It was Germanic in nature, but its complexity was even beyond the scope of his own vast knowledge of ancient runes. He could only hope that his servant had found someone competent enough to do these correctly, or they would both face the fury of his displeasure.

Harry moved over to the closet and opened the door, revealing his meager collection of clothes. He dropped to his knees, and placed the rune at the back of his closet, out of plain sight. With a deep breath, he tapped the large circle of bone with his wand.

He felt a tinge of magic wash through him as red light spilled from the activation rune, spreading to the perimeter runes he had previously set up. While confident it had worked, he needed to be completely sure.

He raised his wand to his eyes, letting out an incantation of "Trafero visi veneficus!" The magical sight spell took over his vision, showing the pulse of the perimeter runes, and the bright red glow that sprang vertically in both directions, far beyond the boundaries of the floor and ceiling of the room. While whoever crafted it fucked up the height requirement, that was okay, since the room was now

completely hidden from the prying eyes of the Ministry's net of magical surveillance.

With the room properly hidden, he cast a quick locking jinx on the door, followed by another privacy charm. He would hate to be interrupted during the next phase of his plan.

Moving over to his bed, he lifted it up from the head, flipping it carelessly against the wall, where it landed with a crash that wasn't heard outside the room. Beneath the bed's former resting place was a runic circle, carved into the wooden floor, two feet in diameter. Arcane runes covered the outside edge of the circle, copied an obscure Dark Magic tome that lay within his drawer, culled from the very writings of Rasputin himself.

His circle revealed, he reached back into the drawer, withdrawing several more objects. He placed a large piece of rounded quartz in the center of the diagram, the one blank spot on the circle. The second object, a large glass jar, he placed on the ground near the circle. With a wave of his wand, the blood began to siphon from the metamorphmagus' body, filling the cup three-quarters full.

The third object was a small glass vial, filled with a blackish liquid. He removed the cap, pouring the anti-coagulant into the jar containing the blood. Curdled blood was such an inconvenience for the type of finesse his work required. He sat down upon the floor, moving the jar closer to the carving, while withdrawing the fourth object he had taken, which happened to be a quill.

With fierce concentration upon his face, Harry began to use the quill to delicately fill in the gouges in the wood with blood. With no room for error, he worked slowly. As the minutes stretched into an hour, his muscles began to cramp, which he ignored as best he could.

After slightly more than an hour, he collapsed, almost completely stiff with the concentration of his careful movements. A wave of his wand later, the muscle cramps retreated. How nice it was to have use of an untainted magical core, still receptive to the occasional Light spell.

He jumped to his feet then, letting out a luxurious stretch, which he followed by pointing his wand at his opposite arm. He cast a silent cutting curse, opening his upper bicep in a splash of blood. Twirling

the wand around, he carefully guided his blood onto the rounded quartz in the middle of the circle, being careful to slather the stone without contaminating the surrounding blood-filled carvings.

Once the stone was painted, he went directly into a chant. The familiar words that rang throughout the room were supposed to have been outside the limits of human vocals cords, but he had delved into magic far beyond the realm of what even the world's most powerful wizards had never heard of. With each new alien syllable, the carved runes inside the circle began to pulse with a sinister crimson glow, as the blood transferred into pure, tainted magical energy.

The magic poured forth into the piece of quartz, which absorbed the energy. As the runes faded, the quartz increased in luminescence, bathing the entire room in its unholy glow. He felt a rudimentary consciousness began to form, one whose sole purpose was to tear, with only a need to find a seam where it could start.

With the steady increase of the light's intensity, the consciousness reached outward. With what could most closely be defined in human terms as satisfaction, it found its seam. Without arms, it reached into the rift that had been created by the murder of the young woman, and pulled. He felt his soul split in two, the consciousness departing with half of it, searching for another place to put it.

Harry addressed the mind with what sounded like a quick growl, and it complied, depositing the soul fragment.

With the process completed, the light retreated back into the piece of rock. A cold smile graced his face as triumph raged in his spirit. Everything had gone according to plan. He had his sixth Horcrux.

He sent a quick cleaning spell at the metamorphmagus' scalp, cleansing it of gore, before depositing it in a trash bag he had pilfered from the storeroom. He then pointed it at the dead body, and transfigured it into a dead cat, to be thrown into the middle of the street tonight. Transfiguration of dead tissue was so much easier than live.

While he still had a very incriminating room to clean, he couldn't help but feel excitement, anticipation. He moved over to his bureau,

withdrawing a bit of parchment, in preparation for his servant's owl, which was scheduled to arrive during the night.

Now the fun could really begin.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Author Notes:

This is the first proper chapter to stray far from the canonical chronology. I hope that it proved to be at least somewhat interesting and/or intriguing. While it may seem confusing now, a great deal of Harry's current situation will be explained next chapter. That being said, feel free to leave any questions in a review, I'll answer any question I get to the best of my ability, providing it doesn't spoil what I have planned.

Any comments, suggestions or criticisms would be deeply appreciated. I'll make an effort to answer every review I get.

Thanks to the lovely Lillith Nocturne for the beta work on this chapter.

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Thanks for reading.

Second Movement: Malign Paradigm

October 29, 1981

Three days prior to Voldemort's defeat

Lord Voldemort's most trusted servants formed a semi-circle around the seated Dark Lord; the Inner Circle members kneeled low. In the gloom of the dimly lit Parkinson study, Lucius observed that only the Dark Lord's crimson eyes shone brightly, his malevolent gaze fixed upon a point of Lucius' left.

"And Bellatrix, what progress has been made on the location of the Longbottoms?"

Lucius noticed, in his peripheral vision, Bellatrix rise from the kneeled position that the rest of the Voldemort's Inner Circle held, arranged in a semi-circle around a seated Voldemort.

"Milord" Bellatrix began, "We are very close to finding the blood-traitors. It's only a matter of time."

"Time is a luxury that we cannot afford at this moment, Bellatrix. It is imperative that the Longbottoms are located within the week. Inform Crouch and Rabastan their new priority is to assist you."

Bellatrix, stung by the chastisement, opened her mouth to lay the blame on Rookwood, but then thought better of it.

"Yes, milord," she replied obediently, and returned to her kneeling position.

Lucius smirked in amusement. While his sister-in-law may be mentally unbalanced, she was certainly not stupid. No Death Eater had a desire to taste their Lord's potent Cruciatus curse.

Voldemort held his gaze on Bellatrix for a few more seconds, almost daring her to make excuses for her failure.

Finally satisfied by her deference, he returned his attention to the assembled crowd.

"I have nothing further to say. You're all dismissed."

Lucius prepared to execute the customary final bow, but Voldemort's cold voice spoke again.

"Except for you, Lucius."

He felt his heart clench in fear, but remained outwardly stoic. Their master did not take kindly to movements betraying the mind, as he considered it a sign of weakness. It was a lesson that all novice Death Eaters learned quickly.

The rest of the Inner Circle bowed once more, before rising and filing out the door. From the corner of his eye, Lucius noted that Rookwood was the last to leave, closing the door behind him and blotting out the light from the hallway. The Parkinson study once again thrown into dimness, he couldn't help but feel jealousy towards the Unspeakable. Private meetings after being singled out by the Dark Lord typically didn't end well, as Regulus Black would be able to attest to.

That is, if the younger Black were alive.

Lucius remained bowed, not wanting to be the first to break etiquette. After a minute of silence, his Master spoke.

"You may rise, Lucius."

He rose slowly, paying no heed to the slight stiffness that accompanied holding such a rigid position. Once upon his feet, Voldemort slowly rose to a standing position, putting the two Wizards at equal eye level. While his eyes and posture betrayed nothing, internally he was nearly consumed by fear. The only thing that held his resolve from shattering were his Occulemency shields.

The Dark Lord appraised him for a moment before speaking.

"I'm most impressed, Lucius. Your mental control never ceases in its vigilance."

"A Wizard who cannot master himself has no hope of mastering anyone else."

Voldemort smiled a mirthless grin.

"Do you have any idea why I have summoned you, Lucius?"

"No, my lord."

Voldemort chose not to elaborate on his purpose, but instead reached into his robe. He withdrew what looked like a small book, with an envelope sticking out from its pages. The book was pressed into his hands.

Lucius glanced down. A closer inspection revealed that it was not a book, but a diary bound in black leather. Why was his master giving him this?

He looked up, a question on his lips, but Voldemort silenced him with a wave of his hand, before speaking himself.

"The diary is more than it appears to be. When the time is right, it has the ability to possess, to compel its host into opening the Chamber of Secrets, and achieve Slytherin's noble goal of eradicating the Mudblood scum at Hogwarts."

Lucius didn't even think the Chamber had actually existed.

Voldemort, as if reading his thoughts, let out a short laugh. "I assure you, it does exist."

The slight smile dropped from his Master's mouth, and his expression grew austere.

"I only wish for you to keep it hidden. I am giving it to you for safeguarding; you are not to use it to further your own agenda," warned Voldemort, crimson eyes narrowed.

"However" he continued, "The letter contained within the diary is far more important."

Lucius found himself mystified. Why would a simple letter be of greater importance than a way to open Salazar's long-lost creation? His Lord chose to not elaborate on the subject.

"You may be accomplished in hiding your thoughts, Lucius, but I don't need to gaze into your mind to know your soul. Your loyalty to

me is merely a function of your understanding of what disobedience would entail."

Lucius felt fear grip him. He didn't have a chance if the Dark Lord intended to kill him. He could only hope to placate him.

"My lord, I have served only your will since I took your mark."

Voldemort grinned humorlessly at his statement.

"If what you spoke was lies, I would already have killed you. No, regardless of the fact that you only possess loyalty to yourself, you are still very valuable to me, worthy of being within my Inner Circle."

He felt his mind slightly ease after the Dark Lord's statement. It seemed evident he would leave this meeting alive.

"In two days, Halloween will arrive. On that night, the death-blow to the Light will be delivered, as is appropriate for the night when Dark Magic is at its most potent."

Lucius found himself confused. Could they be truly this close to triumph?

Voldemort let out another short lived cold laugh, before his eyes grew hard, piercing into Lucius' grey orbs.

"Were I to be absent for a time, some may conveniently forget their allegiances. Those certain factions may use the defeat of the Light as an opportunity to take the mantle of England's sole Dark Lord. Therefore, I require a vow from you."

Lucius felt his heart stop. Surely he wouldn't be coerced into...

"An Unbreakable Vow, Lucius."

While his exterior showed nothing, internally Lucius was a whirlwind of emotion. He found being bound by vows to be completely abhorrent, far from the wiggle room provided by deep pockets and magical litigation. There was no escaping the finality of a magical vow.

Even stranger still was his Lord's logic. All of the Death Eaters, himself included, were well aware that they would never succeed in combat against him. That, coupled with his vast skills in Legilemency, virtually assured the Dark Lord never had to worry about assassination attempts from within. What were his true motivations? However, as much as he would like to deny his Lord's demand, resistance was not an option.

"My Lord, whatever you require, I shall grant."

A mocking smile played at the corner of his Master's lips, a brash statement that he suspected Lucius' true thoughts on the matter.

"Wormtail, reveal yourself."

From the corner of the room, Lucius saw a short, pale man materialize. Lucius stared for a second before recognition dawned. Peter Pettigrew? One of those idiotic Marauders, a Gryffindor, was working for the Dark Lord?

"Lucius, Peter, I'm sure you already know one another."

He noted the Dark Lord seemed to be taking a sort of pleasure in this shock. The same could not be said for Pettigrew, who looked like he would rather be anywhere else. He had deep rings under his eyes, and looked unkempt in general. The double life he was living must have been catching up with him.

The Dark Lord strode over to Lucius, and presented his right hand. Lucius complied, grasping it with his left. Lucius hid his revulsion, his Lord's hand not feeling like human skin anymore, as it was without lines or calluses. It was also cold, nothing like a living being should be.

The Dark Lord turned his attention to Wormtail.

"Wormtail, take out your wand, you're our Bonder."

The pudgy man fumbled for a second, before withdrawing his own wand.

"Then let us begin. Will you, Lucius, agree to never open the letter contained within the diary unless you fail to acquire the rights to a dead family's vault?"

"I will," said Lucius, taken aback at how vague the terms were.

At the conclusion of the first part, a thin jet of red flame shot from Wormtail's wand and wrapped around their linked hands.

"And will you, should you need to open the letter, follow the instructions contained within?"

"I will."

A second jet of flame joined the first.

"Do you, Lucius, swear upon your life to uphold this vow?"

"I will."

A third whip of flame shot from the wand, linking around their hands like a chain. Lucius felt the magic flowing through him, the vow taking form.

"Thank you, Lucius," the Dark Lord said, without a hint of gratitude, a cruel smile upon his face.

"Whatever my Lord requires, I shall provide," Lucius graciously replied, stricken with terror internally. How could he possibly fulfill the terms of a vow that didn't have a single specific clause in it?

"Lucius, you will know when the time is right," said Voldemort, his smile inching wider.

He found himself doubting that statement, but didn't voice his belief.

"Now leave us, I have other matters to attend to," dismissed Voldemort, turning to the spy, Peter Pettigrew.

Lucius complied, and exited from the dark study into the well-lit hallway, a single haunting thought burning its way through his mind;

What had he been pulled into?

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

April 15, 1990

Four months prior to Tonks' murder

Lucius Malfoy sat in his drawing room, a glass of brandy in hand, his pupils reflecting the yellow flames that licked at the wood in the fireplace. While a potent drink and his favorite leather chair were often enough to soothe his thoughts, that certainly wasn't the case tonight, his mind blazing every bit as bright as the fire that lay upon the hearth.

Earlier that day, Lucius had made his way into Gringotts. While Wizarding inheritance law was vastly complicated and arcane, he was well accustomed to its nuances, more so than almost any other wizard in Britain. According to one of the more obscure inheritance laws, a possible successor to a family's vault had ten years to present themselves at Gringotts. If no such successor came forth, then a related family could make a claim to the family's fortune.

While the three remaining Potters had not been dead for ten years, Lucius left nothing to chance. Who knew what other delusional family would put forth a claim? It was one of the many ways that allowed for the Malfoy name to maintain its wealth and holdings throughout the generations, using the vast expanse of the Malfoy bloodlines to claim right to many a family vault.

However, his visit had not gone as planned. He had been rebuked by the manager of the Potter vaults. The cursed goblin had not even seemed interested in the light suggestions of wealth or the veiled menace of hinted threats. It had been frustrating, to say the least. He had left the office without speaking, going straight back to Malfoy Manor, seeking a quiet place where he could gather his thoughts.

There were a great many things that Lucius was troubled about regarding his current situation. It was no great secret that goblins were among the vilest and most distrustful of all creatures, backstabbing parasites that were solely motivated by greed. Normally, the promise of a gold bribe was enough to motivate any goblin to depart from lawful nomenclature. Not this goblin, however.

He really couldn't remember its name, all their barbaric names always blended together for him.

Goblins were not difficult to understand. If it had refused the offer of gold, then that meant the goblin had more to gain by keeping the vault in the Potter name. Lucius was confident that no other family had put forth a claim, so he knew that he wasn't currently being outbid with his bribes. He did, however, know that Gringotts charged hugely inflated interest rates for vaults which hadn't any activity. The vault manager would have made a nice cut of the interest Gringotts charged. However, the gold lost from voiding the last six months of Potter control would have been far more than made up for by the gold Lucius was offering the goblin.

Lucius, his head formerly lowered in thought, snapped to attention as the truth hit him like a banisher. The vault must still be under Potter control; the bloodline hadn't been completely extinguished. The vault manager wasn't interested in the gold because it would pale in comparison to what it could make long-term from the compounded inactivity interest.

"How could this be?" Lucius thought to himself. It had been confirmed that the elder Potters had both been murdered. While the body of their young son had never been recovered, it had seemed like a safe assumption that his body had been destroyed by his former master. The home had been described too him as being almost completely obliterated by an explosion. It had seemed almost clear, that the explosion had disintegrated both young Harry Potter and the Dark Lord.

New found knowledge in hand, he was more than willing to change his viewpoint. How he could not conceive, but somehow the youngest Potter had survived. The Blood Link to the Potter vaults maintained. Not only did that interfere with his financial aspirations, but he began to feel a slight pressure upon him, as if his own magic was weighing down upon him.

His thoughts turned back to that fateful night, three days before his master's destruction. The vow he had been coerced into making had hung over him like a dark cloud for the first few years. While he eventually learned to not think about it, there were the occasional nights where he lay awake, wondering if he was missing the sign

that would allow him to open the letter, and release him from this wretched vow.

Unexpectedly, it would seem the first condition had been met. If he had been unsure the vow had pertained to the Potters, the slight pressure he now felt would have cleansed him of all doubt. He shivered, uncontrollably. It was as if the Dark Lord was breathing down his neck, his commands still being carried out almost ten years after his death. What had his master known that no one else did?

He shook himself from his musings. He was a Malfoy, a Slytherin, and would not spend time moping. Slightly more balanced now, he brought the glass to his mouth and finished off the remaining brandy. He closed his eyes as the soothing fire flowed down his throat. As the burning abated, he let out a heavy sigh, before rising to his feet.

Lucius took out his wand, and raised it above his head, dispelling the glamour covering the middle of the floor. Where before the floor was smooth gray stone, there lay a circle twelve feet in diameter, with a smaller circle four feet in diameter in the center. The outer circle was bordered by gold painted ivy patterns, while the center circle contained the Malfoy family crest.

He withdrew a silver knife from his robes, and drew it deeply across his outstretched palm. A sharp intake of breath was his only reaction to the slice. Crimson blood oozed slowly from the wound site, dripping from his hand into the center of the crest. The first protection accounted for, the Blood Seal, Lucius spoke that activation phrase.

"Amat victoria curam."

At once the outer circle began to slowly sink into the floor without a sound. The height displacement varied linearly, creating a spiral staircase. He quickly descended, leaving the squalor of his drawing room behind, into one of the many secrets of the Malfoy ancestral home. Smooth, grey stone blocks made up the wall, his way lighted by the flickering of Gubraithian torches set into alcoves, the everlasting-fire that had burned since the foundations had been laid.

Twenty feet down, Lucius felt the magic in the air as he passed through the preservation wards, a necessity to prevent the intrusive dampness that accompanied underground construction.

The tight staircase ended on the thirty-second step, in an arched entryway, which he passed through. Inside lay a small room, a fifteen foot square with low ceilings. Along the side walls alternated tall, thin wooden shelves, and portraits displaying only empty canvas.

The shelves had glass covers, and contained a large variety of items. A complete set of silver dinnerware, daggers with jewel encrusted handles, an ornate pocket watch and brass candlesticks were only a few of the items that lined the wooden shelves.

At the far end of the room was only a single wooden shelf, flanked by another two empty portraits. Most of the items in this room were his personal treasure trove of Dark Artifacts. While he certainly had little compunction against using items of this nature for personal gain, he looked at them with the viewpoint of a collector, more concerned with their aesthetic value than any real usefulness. However, this shelf was different from the others.

The first few shelves were cluttered with rings, bracelets and other jewelry of vastly different expense. Every one of the items was a memento from every raid or attack he had taken part in as part of Voldemort's inner circle. In essence, it was an abstract scrapbook detailing his entire history with the Death Eaters. If his museum was ever found, he could be linked to countless murders, beyond even the long reach of his political contacts. It could be considered a risk, but Lucius had the utmost of confidence in his trophy room's protections.

The top shelf held only a few items, of little apparent value to the outsider: A few books, a small diary with an envelope sticking out, and various seemingly innocent items. They were the cornerstone of his collection, items personally given to him by the Dark Lord.

He withdrew the diary from the shelf, looking at it briefly. It was a simple looking thing, bound in black leather. A yellowed letter was tucked into its pages. He opened the diary, exposing the blank pages, and withdrew the letter. It was without mark, as it had been hand delivered, sealed with black wax formed into the shape of the Dark Mark. It had been ten years since it had been given to him.

The Unbreakable Vow hanging over his head like a guillotine, he placed the diary back upon the shelf, and then broke the seal holding the letter shut. He pried the envelope open, withdrawing the letter.

The Dark Lord's spidery scrawl met his eyes, black ink filling up the both sides of the sheaf of parchment. All too aware of the deadly oath held over him, he began to read.

Lucius,

The conclusion you've drawn since your failure to secure the Potter vaults is correct. Harry Potter still lives. For reasons I won't go into here, the Potters were the key to the demise of the Light.

Nothing has changed since I gave you this letter. Regardless of what has transpired in my absence, all of the Potters must still be destroyed. I had a contingency plan should my first attempt prove unsuccessful, which you will carry out, to the letter.

A mile outside Little Hangleton, on a hillside which is overlooked by a large Muggle house at the top of the hill, is a Dark Artifact of immense power. It's inside a dilapidated cabin, set off from the road, almost hidden by the tangles of trees.

The artifact is a gold ring with a black stone set into it. This is what you will use to kill Harry Potter. The ring's powers are of my own design, and will circumvent the protections upon Harry Potter.

On the reverse side of this letter are instructions on how to avoid the protections placed upon the cabin where the ring is located. You will follow these instructions exactly, or either the Unbreakable Vow or the potent defenses in the cabin will kill you.

Once you have acquired the ring, you will buy a new, non-descript owl and use it to send the ring to Harry Potter. If the owl should return without the ring undelivered, you are to return the ring to its hiding spot. Below the retrieval instructions are the steps to recreating the protections. Under no circumstances will you keep the ring in your possession.

My reach is long, Lucius. While I may have been gone for ten years, I will someday return. Fail me in any manner, and there will be a reckoning. Succeed, and our shared dream becomes a reality.

- Lord Voldemort

While he found many items of interest in the Dark Lord's apparent posthumous correspondence, the final paragraph chilled him to the bone. Could his former Master still be alive? A day ago, he could have scoffed at the notion, but he found that much had changed in the past twenty-four hours. The letter, the Unbreakable Vow, the Potter heir surviving somehow, there was just too much here to be a coincidence. Had the Dark Lord actually orchestrated this entire situation, merely biding his time? And if that were the case, why had Potter survived the initial attack? Surely his Lord had not planned for Harry's survival?

With an acute longing for simpler times, unbound by any master, Lucius turned the letter over in his hands. As he began to read the instructions for the ring's retrieval, his jaw dropped.

Without a guideline, he couldn't conceive a single way anyone could acquire the ring. Even Dumbledore himself would be hard pressed to penetrate the defenses present. Deadly wards of several different designs made up the primary defense. Even if a skilled Curse Breaker were to disable the wards, the moment they went down, one of the most deadly Dark curses known to Wizarding kind awaited.

The Segnior Arsus curse was usually too complex to use in combat, but was very potent as a security measure. It could be charmed to attach to a single object, or to an area. In this instance, it appeared to be linked to the ring. Whoever was unlucky enough to touch the ring, would feel an immense, burning pain as their fingers started to burn from within. The curse acts slow, scorching flesh cell-by-cell. It usually takes hours for the curse to run its course and kill a person, but that time may seem to the victim like an eternity burning in pain. Worst of all, there was no known counter-curse.

With a heavy sigh, he tucked the letter into his pocket. With an Unbreakable Vow hanging above his head, a former Master who may still be alive, and a battery of deadly wards to disable, he didn't

have much time to waste. With one final quick glance around the room, Lucius ascended the stairs, leaving his trophy room behind.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

April 17, 1990

Four months prior to Tonks' murder

A ten year-old Harry Potter sat on his bed, within his room at the London Muggle Orphanage. He was hunched over, jaw supported by balled fists, his elbows resting upon his knees. He was gazing intently at the piece of blank wall directly across from him. Truth be told, it wasn't very interesting. It was dull white sheetrock that had been painted many times over, in differing shades. There were a few indentations in the wall, as if a child had failed in their goal to punch a hole through the wall.

While Harry would even admit that there weren't very many points of study on the wall, or anything even remotely approaching interest, it did have its uses. When one stares at the same point for a long time, the world starts to drop away. Everything, the feelings, the emotions, the world itself, it just fades into obscurity. After the atrocity that occurred two months ago, he found himself using this technique often.

He discovered that when the world fades into the background, so follows the painful memories, which he had in abundant quantities. He supposed that Crowley wouldn't exactly be pleased with him, since his mental training instructor had always said that Wizards were blessed in that they had the ability to master their minds, to not let emotion affect one's self.

The doctors that had seen him at the hospital observed that he had been bereft of burns, despite the state of his singed clothes, but unresponsive to any inquiries. Harry found he hadn't been in a very talkative mood. After the horror that had occurred at his childhood home, his memories were disjointed, unclear, as if they had happened to someone else, and been told about them later.

All the social workers had was his name, which they obviously were unsuccessful when it came to tracking down his family, or any other missing children matching his description. With no other alternative,

they had sent him to the orphanage. Harry didn't mind. One of the benefits to being the clear victim of psychological trauma was having a room to one's self, a rare occurrence in the overcrowded orphanage.

Slowly, though, he could feel himself healing. He still couldn't face his own mind, and the memories contained within, but he felt more human with each day, signs that maybe someday he would be fine. He anxiously awaited his Hogwarts letter, which would provide a nice distraction, something to fixate on aside from inanimate objects.

He was broken from his musings by a tapping sound upon the window. Removing his head from his hands, he turned around, greeted by the sight of a tawny owl tapping upon the glass with its beak.

For the first time in several months, he felt a slight elation. Had the Hogwarts owls been sent out early? Upon moving towards the window, he observed the owl held not a letter in its talons, but a small package. Reaching the window, he unlatched it and pulled it upwards.

The owl wasted no time, swooping in and dropping the parcel off on his bed. The package delivered, it flew over to his dresser, perching itself atop it.

Harry found himself confused. The package was very small, too much so to contain a letter from Hogwarts. He had no surviving contacts in the Wizarding world, so he couldn't conceive who would send him anything.

Feeling slightly stupid, he addressed the owl.

"Thanks for the delivery. Do you know who sent me the package?"

The owl was very succinct in its reply, a single hoot.

Not being well versed in the tongue of avian messengers, he unsurprisingly found himself no closer to an answer.

Curiosity prodding him forth, he approached the package. It appeared to be a very small object, wrapped in brown paper. He picked it up in his hands, feeling the object through the roughly

textured paper. It seemed to be a small square box, perhaps four inches in dimension.

While he was wary of foreign objects, he figured who had wished him harm would have given up long ago, considering the well-hidden home he had grown up in, cloaked from all methods of magical tracking.

With a deep breath, he tore away the rough paper, revealing the object.

His initial deduction had proved correct, as it indeed was a box. It seemed to be made of a dark wood, similar in design to the ring boxes he had seen on the Muggle television. However, these details were insignificant compared to what was painted on top of the box. In red ink, on top of the box, was the Potter family crest.

His heart stopped for a moment. He didn't have a single memento from his biological parents, the only pictures he had were from old newspapers that his guardians had kept for him. He only knew about the Potter crest from one of the English heraldry books he found in the library.

With a renewed eagerness, all thoughts of caution thrown aside, he pried the box open. The interior of the box was lined with a velvety red material, with a ring nestled in the center.

Harry was beset by excitement. Maybe his parents had set this up before their death, that Gringotts would send him a family heirloom from the Potter vault. Upon his opening of the box, the owl silently took off from its perch, and flew off into the night air. He never noticed in his preoccupation with the odd gift. Nor did he stop to question the potentially ominous fact that the sender was anonymous.

He removed the ring from the box, examining it. It appeared to be roughly crafted from gold, with a black stone set into it. Harry didn't know a great deal about precious gems, but he thought it might be obsidian. There was a coat of arms engraved upon the stone, clearly wasn't the Potter one, but one completely unfamiliar to him. He noticed that the ring was too big to fit around any of his fingers, but might fit around his thumb.

Without thinking, he placed the ring onto his left thumb. A sense of contentment fell over him the moment he placed it on. For the first time in a while, he felt at peace. And why not? He had just been given a piece of his family history. Perhaps his dreams tonight wouldn't be filled with fire and screams of terror.

With a smile upon his face, Harry collapsed upon his bed, his bright green eyes drooping shut.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

August 20, 1990

The woman attempted to scream, which proved futile as I pressed the pillow over head. Blood quickly saturated the white pillow, but didn't affect its sound dampening efficiency. As the seconds grew into minutes, the visible features of the middle-aged woman morphed into those of a younger one, barely out of Hogwarts.

I pulled the pillow back slightly, just enough to expose where her hair met the scalp, while still holding the pillow tight over her mouth. With a carefree air, I brought the knife from my pocket, and began to roughly hack at her roots, crudely scalping the young woman. Her thrashing increased in intensity, flecking small drops of blood everywhere, but not enough to dislodge my grip on her. Her thrashings gave way to hopeless sobs as a small pile accumulated next to her head, containing ragged clumps of blood-matted hair, with bloodied and rent skin still sticking to them...

Harry awoke with a scream boiling in his throat, terror in his mind. He opened his eyes, only to shut them against the invasive light battering his currently sensitive pupils. He clenched them tight, a ward against the tattered shreds of the nightmare.

He was no stranger to nightmares, with his mind having a deep well from which horrors could be drawn. It was a rare occurrence when he didn't have to partially relive that fateful night where he had lost everyone he cared about. Usually, he played the part of the helpless by-stander, powerless to do anything as the past replayed itself.

Tonight, though, had been far different than normal. He had felt the cold handle of the blade pressed into his palm, the hot blood pumping out from the woman's punctured jugular. He was even

aware of his emotions, which were indifferent to the murder, done with all the consideration one might give to breathing. He was loathe to admit it, but found it more similar to a memory than a dream, the only problem being he was fairly certain he'd never killed anyone.

With the dream fading into obscurity, Harry stretched his body out. Much to his surprise, he found that he wasn't on his hard, uncomfortable bed. Rather, he seemed to be on an expanse of thick carpeting, the likes of which he hadn't seen since his home went up in flames. This didn't make a single shred of sense, considering carpeting was a commodity far out of his orphanage's price range.

His confusion increasing by the minute, he opened his eyes slowly, in an attempt to let his pupils dilate properly. He rolled over to his side, away from the light, and opened his eyes fully. A bookcase was the first thing that met his eyes. It was packed solid with thick tomes, not yielding any breathing room for the books. He couldn't help but notice the similarity the bookshelf bore to the library of his youth, right down to the black wood of the shelf, polished to a bright sheen. His gaze drifted downwards, to the carpet he had apparently fallen asleep on.

Recognition dawned in his eyes, as adrenaline flared in his veins. He leapt to his feet, all vestiges of sleep gone, beholding the exact library that had been a fixture of his childhood. The deep green carpeting, the double stacks of books, the staircase leading to the second upper level of the multi-floored room, the large oak table in the middle, the huge storm windows stretching from floor to ceiling, it was all the same.

It couldn't be. He had seen this room devoured by flames, had hid between the stacks of smoldering books, praying that the Legion wouldn't find him.

With an anguished cry, Harry ran to the mahogany double doors, throwing them carelessly open. He rushed down the hallway, trying to outrun the memory he seemed to be trapped in, and jumped down the stairs, only hitting two steps on his way down. He jumped the rest of the way, hitting the bottom and stumbling. He quickly regained his balance and threw open the front door.

He stumbled out of the threshold of the house, collapsing upon the green lawn. Shakes wracked his body as he buried his face into the

cool grass. He tried to bottle up his emotions, as he always had at the orphanage. Despite his best efforts, tears began to leak from his eyes, which threw the flood gates wide open.

For the first time since his escape, he cried, having finally faced and addressed the night he had lost everything he cared about. It proved to be therapeutic, as the tears had washed away the mental barriers he had put up, blocking out all thought. With his newfound clarity, he was able to make more sense of the situation, look at it with a level-headed temperament.

From an early age, he had been taught mental training by Crowley. While he had never been able to master his mind, which was unsurprising considering it was almost unheard of for a child of Harry's age to begin Occulemency training, he had mastered a few techniques. His progress had been slow, but every minor victory he achieved convinced him it was worth the effort, especially with the secrets that held residence within his mind, that he had always been told he must protect at all costs.

He had started with shielding specific memories. He would tell Crowley vague details of a certain memory, and he would have to stop his teacher from finding that particular memory within his mind. It was not easy, but after a few months, he found he could fend off some of his teacher's Legilemency probes.

With a small grasp upon shielding, they had moved onto a technique that Crowley had referred to as "Shaping". It was not a method commonly used in the Wizarding world, but it was effective for children who couldn't augment their Occulemency shields well with magic, or for weaker wizards.

The idea behind Shaping was that under constant duress, anyone's mental shields will fold if enough physical and mental traumas are applied. Therefore, that fact is conceded from the forefront, and the mind itself is made hard to decipher. An untrained person's mind will look like a whirlwind of memories, without any resemblance of order. A typical mind trained in Occulemency is surrounded by a thick shield, with weaker, meaningless memories behind the shields, in an attempt to obscure memories of vital importance.

A person, whose mind was "Shaped", had no visible memories within their mind. If one were to break through their shields, they

would be treated to a landscape or place of some sort. Those who Shaped their minds modeled it after a place they were intimately familiar with. The objects within the landscape were memories, disguised as everyday objects.

It had taken him two years, but he had eventually successfully Shaped his mind. He modeled it after his childhood home, a building that he knew better than any other, even more so than those who had occupied it before his arrival.

While it was now clear to him that he had been confined to his mind, the why still eluded his grasp. He rose to his feet, sparing a glance to the forest that ringed the secluded property. What he saw shocked him.

When Shaping his mind, the forest had been fifty feet deep, extending directly to the Occulemency shields that enclosed his mind. Now, it was only about twenty feet deep, as the opaque shields had contracted. Outside the shields raged what appeared to be an ocean of green fire.

His feet brought him closer to the rolling flames, until he stood several feet from it, his thin, light-blue Occulemency shield being the only separation from the all-consuming fire. Not even cinders remained on the other side, the surface being just as dead as the moon's. Crowley had taught him how to gauge the condition of one's shield from within the mind. With a deep breath, he moved a step close to the shield, putting his body mere inches from it.

Even in close proximity to the shield, he couldn't feel any heat radiating, which provided the relief of knowing that his mind wasn't in immediate danger. The first test passed, he carefully pressed his hand against the shield. Mild warmth met his hand, which left him with hope.

The green flames seemed consistent with Crowley's descriptions of possession, of an invading presence battering against the host's shields. While Harry certainly wasn't thrilled about being controlled by someone else, he at least took heart in the fact that the force battering at his shields was not very strong at all. He had only been undergoing mental training for about three years, and had relatively weak shields. It shouldn't have lasted against any Wizard with even below-average Legilemency skills.

While pondering why such a weak Wizard would try to take control of him, when he had always been told that his future enemies would be quite formidable, he attempted to pinpoint his last memory before awakening inside his mind. He quickly came to the conclusion that his last memory had been of going to sleep, after receiving the ring by post.

With a start, Harry wondered if it had actually been the ring that had possessed him. He had his share of exposure to Dark Artifacts through the various tomes in the library, but had never heard of an object with an actual magical core, since possession required active magic to work. While all Dark Artifacts had their enchantments cast upon them to produce specific effects, they had no magic of their own to cast. The soul had active magic inherent within it, but Harry couldn't really see how an artifact could have a soul attached to it.

Taking a wide view of the situation, he found that several aspects did not just add up. By the way his shields had contracted, and the apparent rate the possessor battered against his shields, it seemed that he had been under its thrall for a long time, though the exact time frame was still unknown. That all made sense to him, but why had he been able to rouse his conscious mind from its sleep? Since time spent in the mind was no different than in the outside world, and a person's perceptions of time are already established and ingrained into their psyche, there's no doubt he had been under for a while.

The only thing that made any sense to him was that perhaps the force possessing him had weakened. This gave Harry some sort of hope that he may find a way to free his mind. He briefly considered breaking through the barrier and taking his body by force, but if he failed to completely expel the intruder, it would be able to find the hole he used to travel through the shield, destroying all the memories of his mind much like it did the trees upon the edges of the forest.

No, he would have to wait, to bide his time until he could assure his victory. With a turn of the heel, he began to walk back towards the house, his thoughts on who would have sent him the ring. It was rather foolish to think that the wards and charms of his childhood that prevented him from receiving malicious mail had followed him to the orphanage.

Re-entering the house, he strode for the living room. The television, a monstrosity with fake wooden paneling, a refugee from mid-eighties cutting edge technology, hadn't been a frequently used appliance during his childhood. While his guardians never exactly discouraged him from watching it, enriching his mind other more productive fashions usually brought a smile of pride and approval he never received after reciting things he learned on the telly.

He reached towards the power button, turning it on with a flick of his wrist. The screen slowly filled in, until he was presented with the view from his currently hijacked eyes.

Crowley had taught him a few fail safes, which every good practitioner of the mental arts knew. He especially stressed the importance of having access to one's senses, should their body be possessed. These backdoors took the place of ordinary objects in his mind, but contained far more than met the eye. If one were to open the oven, the smell wafting out would be the direct information his hijacked nose was experiencing. If he wanted access to his hearing, he only needed to listen to the fifth CD in the six-disc changer. All his senses were arranged in this manner, which would at least grant him the element of surprise, as no one would expect someone of his age to possess such skills.

The actual mechanics of how to develop the backdoor access to the outside world was beyond him; he actually had to allow Crowley enter his mind and form the links. While his guardians had been huge proponents of teaching, and usually letting him perform all the actual practical work, Crowley had considered this important enough to step in.

The display on the television screen showed the surface of the desk that resided within his room. His left hand held a chisel, his right a hammer. The warped wood that comprised the writing surface was covered in a thick layer of dust. Small circular stone tablets littered the desk, each covered in distinctive runes. His knowledge of ancient runes was lacking, but he thought he recognized some of the runes as being of Futhorc origin. He believed one of the stones bore the cen rune, which translated to "torch", but he couldn't be certain.

Harry found it odd that his body was still within the walls of the orphanage. Considering that runic stones looked like they were being stockpiled, it seemed to indicate that something big was going down.

He turned away from the television for a moment, and grabbed the large headphones from their wall-mounted position. He pressed the power button to the large stereo, and cycled through the multi-disc changer until it settled upon the fifth disc. He placed the headphones over his ears, while snaking the cord along the floor to his intended position in the leather armchair.

The only sound that he heard over the headphones was the light tapping of the hammer upon the chisel, gouging further arcane symbols into the stone. While he really hadn't expected his possessor to lay out its plans by talking to itself, it certainly would have made Harry's life easier.

There was a wand lying on the desk, so whoever was controlling him certainly wasn't powerless. If all the possessor had to worry about was Muggles, they probably would just use the wand. No, if they were going to the trouble of carving runes, they were preparing to confront something more than capable of defending itself, most likely a wizard of some sort.

Armed with his newfound hypothesis, the foundations of a plan began to trickle into his head. He reached into the drawer beside the chair, and withdrew a notebook. Perhaps he could copy some of the runes from the desk, and cross reference them with the books in the library.

With a reach backwards, he depressed the handle on the side of the chair. The leather chair's back tilted backwards, and a footrest popped out of the front.

A small chuckle escaped him, the first since he regained consciousness. If he was going to rot his brain with all this television, at the very least he should get comfortable.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

August 27, 1990

It felt as if her intestines had been animated, and had begun to crawl throughout her midsection, quickly followed by a burning sensation spread through her body. Her fingers went slack as she folded to the floor, her body and glass cup striking the floor simultaneously. Her skin bubbled as it shifted into its new form, her bones and musculature shrinking, her long hair receding backwards.

As suddenly as the transformation had begun, it was over. She let out a deep breath, one she hadn't been quite aware she had kept, and opened her eyes. It seemed that the initial Polyjuice transformation was not something that one ever grew accustomed to.

She moved over to the closet, and withdrew a pair of robes more befitting for the task ahead of her. She also doubted that wearing robes three sizes too big for her new body would be the inconspicuous look she wished for.

After changing herself, she took inventory of appearance in the full length mirror. While she wasn't quite fond of her current body, she believed she looked adequate for her scheduled meeting with the Headmaster of Hogwarts, Albus Dumbledore, the sworn enemy of her master.

While she reviled the generally beloved Light Wizard, she did acknowledge his vast power and influence. She would have liked to use the element of surprise that her form provided to mount an assassination attempt, but she had very strict orders, and had no intention of deviating from them.

After slightly adjusting her hair to make it slightly more unruly, she stepped toward the door to her room. She withdrew her wand, and cast a revealing spell upon the hallway. The spell came back negative, confirming it was indeed empty of people. It wouldn't do for anyone to see her leave the room in this form.

She slipped her hood on, obscuring her facial features, before stepping out into the hallway. The odds were long that anyone would have recognized her under the folds of fabric, but she had no intention of leaving anything to chance.

She swept down the hallway, passing by the other silent rooms. She descended the stairs quickly, emerging into the main level of the

Leaky Cauldron. It was mid-day, which accounted for the current sparse patronage. She gave a quick nod to Tom, which he returned with an odd glance, probably due to him being unable to discern her identity.

Making her way to the fireplace, she grabbed a handful of Floo powder, and cast it into the fireplace, while delivering her destination.

"The Headmaster of Hogwarts' Office!" she said confidently.

Green flames sprung to life. She took one deep breath, steadying herself for the large task ahead of her. She had to play this right, or risk unraveling all of their carefully crafted plans.

Once she stepped into the flames, she was whisked away, re-appearing in a flurry of ash within the Headmaster's Office. The office was normally inaccessible from the Floo network, but he would withdraw the block when he had appointments. She rose out of the fireplace, wiping the ash from her robes, her hood dislodged.

"Ah, Miss Tonks, right on time," welcomed Dumbledore.

The silver-haired wizard sat behind a large desk, with papers strewn about in a seemingly random manner. She swallowed the bile that rose in her throat at the sound of his relaxed, serene voice. Adopting a subservient manner, she addressed the wizard's greeting.

"Thanks for seeing me on such short notice, Professor Dumbledore," she replied.

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled at her thanks, which annoyed her to no end. What the fuck did it even mean?

"You are very welcome, Miss Tonks. Keep in mind that you're no longer a student here, so no longer have any obligation to refer to me as 'Professor'. That being said, I will always make the time for any of my former student, when I can. How have your post-Hogwarts exploits treated you?"

She knew a little about the Metamorphagus' summer exploits due to Lucius' vast amount of contacts at the Ministry, but planned to move forward the conversation as soon as she could, to avoid getting trapped in the details.

"It's been kinda odd, knowing I'm not coming back to Hogwarts in the fall. Have you ever heard of the Muggleborn Education department?" she asked, hoping to sound naive. He was second most powerful wizard in Britain; of course he would know about it.

Dumbledore nodded in reply, urging her to continue.

"Well, I work for them, helping them track down and identify Muggleborn students. That's actually why I wanted to talk to you..." she trailed off, trying to inject confusion and doubt into her voice.

"Yes," Dumbledore replied, "there was a distinct air of urgency to your message. What seemed to be the problem?"

She was silent for a second, before addressing Dumbledore in a quiet, fearful voice, "About a week ago, I was sent to a Muggle orphanage in London. Small amounts of accidental magic had been released, just enough to catch the Ministry's attention. It wasn't a big priority to send me out there, just another Muggleborn."

With the conclusion of the leading statement, she became silent again. She had to play up this moment, to get him completely wrapped up in her story.

The Headmaster said nothing to spur her on; he only sat with his head propped up by his interlocking fingers, his gaze one of polite interest.

"We did find a magical child, a boy who looked to be around ten years old."

With a furtive glance around her, as if to check for any eavesdroppers, she lowered her voice.

"Professor, we didn't find a Muggleborn," she whispered, "...we found Harry Potter."

Dumbledore's eyes widened at this declaration, but outwardly showed no other sign of emotion.

She raged inside, but betrayed nothing outwardly. So much for her fucking plan to ensnare him with dramatics! Fucking old wanker, and his mental control.

"Miss Tonks, I'm rather shocked. Are you sure it's him?"

"No," she thought to herself, "I just felt like socializing with you, I didn't bother to confirm it."

"They found him wandering a lonely road in Bedfordshire, his clothes burned, but relatively unharmed. He said his name was Harry Potter, before passing out. He's been unresponsive since then, almost catatonic."

With a great deal of effort, she made her eyes moisten.

"Professor, he's all alone out there, scared. He wouldn't even talk to me when I tried to talk to him. It's like we don't exist to him. I think something horrible happened to him."

Dumbledore looked ready to reply, but she cut him off, not wanting to lose her momentum.

"I told my Director, but she just wants to wait, until she figures out what to do. She doesn't even know that I came here! Please, don't tell her I came here, it could ruin my future chances at the Ministry!" she finished, with a hysterical note in her voice.

He rose from his desk quickly, and stood before her, placing a single hand upon her shoulder.

"Miss Tonks," he began, "you don't have anything to worry about. I'm going to pay a visit to young Mr. Potter right now, and retrieve him. He might need help at St. Mungo's. You have nothing to worry about, I'll talk to Mrs. Lewis, I'm sure she'll understand."

Tears leaked down her cheeks as Dumbledore finished his statement.

He turned back to his desk, pouring a cup of tea, and then pressing it into her shaking hand.

"Have a spot of tea; it will make you feel better. You did the right thing by coming to me," said Dumbledore.

She only nodded in assent, her head lowered.

"Nymphadora, what else can you tell me about Harry? I want to be prepared when I talk to him, to make a good impression, so he'll want to rejoin our world when I ask him."

It took a large effort to still her laughter. There was no way he could possibly be prepared for what "Harry" had in store for him during their first meeting.

She took a sip of tea, before replying, "I don't really know how much he knows about our world, since he never even acknowledged me."

"You did say that already. My apologies," Dumbledore apologized, inclining his head slightly.

She nodded once, acknowledging his apology. She was honestly surprised, since she didn't think the old bastard really listened to people too often, too absorbed in his own prattling words to really pay attention to conversation.

"All I really know about him is what he looked like," she volunteered.

He said nothing, only nodded, implying for her to go on.

"Well, he was short for his age, and very skinny. I think he was taken care of; he's just small for his age. He had black hair, green eyes, and hand-me-down clothes, which is what all of the children receive there."

She lowered her head slightly, preparing to inject more sadness into her voice.

"His room is in the southeast corner of the second floor. Other than that, I don't know anything about him. I'm so sorry, sir."

She saw him stiffen slightly at her final statement. Was he familiar with that room?

He gave her shoulder a squeeze of assurance.

"You've nothing to be sorry for, Nymphadora," Dumbledore kindly replied.

"If I were to leave and go pay a visit to Mr. Potter right now, would you be alright by yourself?"

She nodded again, inwardly pleased that her first task was almost complete.

"Take all the time you need here, and help yourself to some more tea if you want," he said, motioning to the steaming teapot on the corner of his desk.

He gave her shoulder on final squeeze before heading to the fireplace, and throwing a handful of Floo powder into it.

Before leaving, he steadied his gaze upon her a final time.

"And Miss Tonks, thank you for bringing this to my attention."

He turned back to the fireplace, and disappeared with a cry of "Diagon Alley".

With the office to herself, she smirked internally, suppressing the urge to smile victoriously. She wasn't about to let out any outward sign that an attentive portrait could catch, and report to Dumbledore. She imagined that if Dumbledore had gotten wind of it, he would have been far more reticent to take her word at face value, which would throw her carefully planned machinations into disarray.

She was well-aware her cover would only last for so long, so she immediately turned to the fireplace, with the intention of Flooing to the Ministry. In a flash of green flames, Narcissa Malfoy disappeared.

One task down, two to go.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Dumbledore appeared in the Leaky Cauldron's fireplace in a flash of green flames. He only stayed long enough to give a friendly nod to Tom, before Apparating to the familiar muggle orphanage, within the heart of London.

Magical travel was quick, but enough so for him to outrun the turbulent thoughts that clung to him. A mere two-and-a-half weeks ago, he had pondered the disappearance of Harry Potter, widely acknowledged as one of the greatest unsolved mysteries of the Wizarding World. Now, not only had he been informed of his location, but had discovered it was in the same exact room where Tom Riddle had slept every summer for sixteen years.

He stood before the dull grey building, and mused on how swiftly time could make a fool of anyone. Even since he had become Headmaster, meeting with Muggleborn students had been delegated to his teaching staff, so had never been presented with another reason to ever venture back to Tom Riddle's childhood home. While time had not been kind to the decaying building, it truly didn't look that different than it did fifty years ago.

With a light twirl of his wand, he transfigured his midnight blue robe, adorned with bright yellow stars and moon shapes, into a Muggle business suit. He let out a slight chuckle, admitting to himself that one would be hard pressed to find a midnight blue suit with bright yellow pinstripes. While he didn't think wearing a Wizard's robes into a Muggle orphanage was a great idea, he was absolutely unwilling to part with his loud style of dress. The odd looks of his colleagues and fellow Wizards never bothered him. Even if they had, the scores of delighted smiles his bright colors had inspired on the face of children would have been worth it.

He opened the front door and let himself into the main foyer. He nodded pleasantly at the few dumbstruck children within, and made his way to where Mrs. Cole's office used to be. He thought it a reasonable assumption that the office had not moved, even if the manager had.

He let out a surprised chuckle when he reached the end of the hall. If the nameplate on the front of the office was to be believed, chief responsibility of the orphanage had not changed in over fifty years. It was only the most tenacious of Muggles that lived to this age, and still lived productive lives.

He rapped a single knock upon the wooden door. Within a few seconds, a strong female voice answered "Come in!"

He complied, closing the door behind him. The woman behind the desk had definitely aged fifty years since they had last met, but still maintained an aura of vitality, despite her advanced age.

She looked slightly taken aback at his bright appearance, but recovered quickly.

"Are you from Social Services?" Mrs. Cole asked, with barely concealed suspicion.

"Yes, I am," Dumbledore replied, "I'm following up on a child that one of my colleagues saw a week ago, Harry Potter."

"Ah, so you must work with Charlotte?" she asked.

Dumbledore nodded in response. Miss Tonks must have used her abilities to take the form of the Muggleborn witch, her boss, to make her job easier.

"Well, I must say, I'm quite displeased with Charlotte at the moment," said Charlotte, eyes narrowed.

"Oh, why is that?"

"She saw Harry Potter and disappeared soon after. She didn't check in with me, and she didn't see any of the other children. It was all very unprofessional, which is completely unlike her."

Dumbledore was surprised. Even though Miss Tonks was relatively new to this position, it still didn't make sense, unless she had just been so overwhelmed by finding Harry Potter that rational thought had fled her.

"I'm not sure why she left so suddenly. You're right; it was very unprofessional of her to do so. Let me apologize on behalf of her, and my entire department. We value your work here very highly, and appreciate everything you do for these children."

Mrs. Cole let out a laugh.

"It's not a big deal, I'm sure something just came up. You've no obligation to kiss my backside over this."

Dumbledore let out a laugh himself, before extending a hand.

"I'm Albus Dumbledore, by the way. We've met, but it was a great many years ago. I haven't been out here in a while."

She shook his hand in a surprisingly strong grip, pumping it once.

"I thought you looked slightly familiar, and the name certainly was unique enough to earn a permanent place in my memory. What ever happened to Tom Riddle? We never saw him after he turned seventeen; he left without saying goodbye to anyone."

Dumbledore hid his reaction quite well, but a deep shame penetrated his being at the mere mention of the child who turned into one of the most evil Dark Lords to ever walk the planet.

Without question, that had been his largest failure. He couldn't help but think what might have been if he had stepped in and tried to find a Wizarding family to take Tom Riddle in. While the orphanage wasn't a bad place to grow up, it didn't provide for the care that Tom Riddle might have needed to turn him from the path to Voldemort.

However turbulent his thoughts may have been, he managed to keep his face impassive, as he had always strived to master himself.

"I regret to inform you that that Tom Riddle had been dead for quite a while," Dumbledore said, the pain in his voice barely noticeable.

Though his voice held barely a trace, Mrs. Cole seemed to intuit the undertow of pain Dumbledore experienced regarding her former ward, and chose to not pursue the subject, despite her thinly veiled curiosity.

He wanted to give her some sort of closure, but didn't know a great way to tell her that Tom had gone on to become the very personification of evil. He held no blame towards the orphanage matron for how Tom turned out, but was certain she would feel a deep guilt if she knew what Tom Riddle had become.

"Tom Riddle was one of the most promising children I had ever met, and his tragic loss at a young age still bothers me to this day," Dumbledore said in a solemn voice. He figured he owed Mrs. Cole at least a minimal explanation for her patience in not pursuing the

subject. While his reply hadn't exactly been articulate, it was the closest version of the truth he could give her, as he did consider losing Tom Riddle to evil to be a tragedy of the highest order.

She seemed to truly understand, as her gaze softened for a moment.

"I'm sorry to hear that, Albus. Do you need a moment, or would you like to see Harry now?"

"Thank you, but I'll be alright," he replied gratefully. "Would you please direct me to his room?"

"Certainly," she replied. "Oddly enough, he has the same room that Tom Riddle used to have. A few months ago, both of the children who shared the room decided to run away. It's odd; both of the boys were two of our better-behaved and happy children. They would have been the last ones I'd expect to run away."

Dumbledore found that to be an unsettling coincidence, but the other piece of information surprised him more.

"I had heard that he really didn't talk to anyone. Did he really approach you to request the room?" Dumbledore asked.

"It seems you've been misinformed. While Harry, during his first few months here wouldn't talk to anyone, over the past few months he does talk to people. While he still does occasionally have his bad days, I really do think he's getting better."

Dumbledore nodded at her words. Inside, he was confused. Perhaps Miss Tonks had caught Harry on a bad day, unwilling to talk to strangers, but the amount of discontinuities between what Mrs. Cole had told him and what Miss Tonks had was mounting rapidly. Then again, she was a rookie at her job, which by nature meant a lot of mistakes were going to be made.

"Well, in that case, I shall endeavor to make my reports more complete than my co-worker," Dumbledore humbly stated.

"Please do. Make sure to see me before you leave, once you're done with Harry," she said, a slight edge to her words, strongly suggesting he heed them.

Dumbledore had every intention of doing so.

"Certainly, I'll be back in about fifteen minutes. Thank you for your time."

Mrs. Cole waved off his thanks, but he got the impression she still appreciated him saying it.

He turned on his heel, and exited her office. He was barely cognizant of the path his feet took him, once again wrapped up in thought. For the first time in almost a decade, he felt anticipation of the unknown flow through him. Long ago he had given up trying to find Harry Potter, deducing that he was too well hidden to ever find.

Now, he was mere steps away from the room that held him. It was an almost inconceivable turn of events.

Before he knew it, he was in front of the closed door. With a hand that almost shook with excitement, he knocked upon the door. There was no response for a few moments, which seemed like several eternities to Dumbledore. He was about to knock again, when a small, quiet voice froze his hand halfway to the door.

"Come in."

With his heart pounding in his chest, Dumbledore opened the door.

The room was very similar to the last time he entered, although the walls looked like they had been roughed up a bit. The bed was a little more modern, but the same battered bureau stood against the wall, and a small desk sat opposite the bed. These, however, were minor compared to the sight on the bed, which took his breath away.

If no one had told him otherwise, the child on the bed could have passed for a direct relative of Tom Riddle. He had the same black hair, parted in the middle and combed down to either side, so unlike his father's unruly mop. He was just as thin as Tom, only far shorter. Their eyes were both the same, dark hazel; Harry had certainly not inherited his mother's eyes. Most disturbing of all was that their positions were exactly the same, as Harry was sitting on the bed, holding an open book.

The only major difference that he could discern was that Harry had an odd, lightning shaped scar upon his forehead.

Dumbledore desperately locked down his Occulemency shields, trying to block the sense of mourning and failure threatening to overtake him. This was not Tom Riddle, but Harry Potter, a boy who was very important, and he certainly wasn't about to lose his cool in front of a child!

Harry's eyes took a guarded look, so similar to Tom's, at Dumbledore's strange reaction. At Harry's look, he had to fight to put his head in his hands. Not exactly the start to the meeting he had hoped for.

He stepped forward, and extended his hand.

"How are you doing today, Harry?"

Harry looked at his outstretched hand for a second, before placing the book on the bed and rising to his feet. He took Dumbledore's hand lightly in his own, shaking it once.

"Who are you?"

"My name is Albus Dumbledore."

Harry didn't have any reaction to the name. Dumbledore began to think that perhaps Harry, sad as it may have been, had never received any exposure to the Wizarding World. He decided to continue on anyway.

"I teach at a fairly prestigious school, for students eleven years and older. Would you be interested in taking a tour sometime, to see if you would like to attend it?"

Harry narrowed his eyes, and gave the professor a look of distrust.

"Why are you asking me? Why not ask the other kids?"

While not the cold rage he had heard from Tom, the same mistrust was still evident.

"I'm asking you because I knew both of your parents, as they both attended the school I taught at, and the special skills needed for the school tend to be genetic in nature. If you're anything like your parents, and I have no reason to suspect you wouldn't be, you have a special gift that most other children do not possess," Dumbledore explained.

Harry didn't waste any time before replying, "Wait, what special gift?"

Dumbledore was disappointed to note that the mention of his parents didn't elicit any response. He really was a great deal like the young Tom Riddle. At that moment, Dumbledore made a vow to himself. He would not let nature take its course. If he had to raise this child by himself, he would, providing him the support and love needed to keep him from falling into darkness.

"Well, Harry, have ever done anything that seemed unnatural, inexplicable?"

Harry was silent for a second, before throwing a pointed glance at the open door behind him.

Dumbledore, understanding at once, went to the door, and closed it. Harry seemed to relax slightly with the door closed.

"I can...sometimes make things happen," Harry whispered.

He found himself interested in the child's answer. Had he been consciously using his power?

"What kind of things can you do, Harry?" he asked, an encouraging smile upon his face.

"All sorts of things," Harry excitedly whispered. "I can make things move without touching them. I can make animals do what I want them to, without training. I can make bad things happen to people who annoy me. I can make them hurt if I want to."

Dumbledore froze at Harry's words, a soul-deep terror enveloping him, one that a Dementor would be hard-pressed to reproduce.

"No, it can't be...." Dumbledore trailed off, unable to articulate anything else. How was the son of James and Lily Potter spewing forth Tom Riddle's words?

He felt helpless as he saw a malicious smile break out over the face of Harry Potter, a look of pure evil that had no business presenting itself upon the face of a ten-year old child. He saw that Harry was about to speak, and was unsurprised to find himself fearful of whatever words would flow forth.

"I can even speak to snakes. I found out when we've been to the country on trips – they find me, they whisper to me. Is that normal for a wizard?"

If anything, Harry's latest words only deepened his paralysis. How the was this even possible? Harry Potter, who was prophesied as the only one with the power to defeat the Dark Lord, now speaking the words of Tom Riddle himself? This was impossible!

Harry continued to smile in an evil fashion, clearly enjoying his current state of mental distress.

"Here, let me show you!" Harry yelled, in an almost maniacal fashion.

He opened his mouth, and let out a series of hisses, which Dumbledore could only assume were words in Parseltongue. At the conclusion of the short burst of hisses, he felt the distinct wash of magic pour over him as Anti-Apparition wards sprang into existence.

With a quick movement, Harry reached under his pillow, and pulled out an ash wand. He twirled it expertly between his fingers, in the exact same fashion Voldemort had used during the first war. He stopped its momentum with the tip pointed directly at Dumbledore, adopting the traditional dueling stance; knees slightly bent, dominant foot forward, weight centered over it.

Harry's expert movements broke him of his paralysis, and he withdrew his wand from his robes, brandishing it before him.

"I see you've finally woken up, Dumbledore," Harry mocked.

"What have you done with Harry?" Dumbledore asked coldly, all traces of warmth gone.

"Oh, he's kicking around somewhere in here," Harry said, while tapping his forehead with his other hand. "I haven't been able to completely devour his soul; the little bastard keeps fighting me back."

Another large smile found its way onto Harry's face. "I suppose that means you'll just have to it easy on me, eh Dumbledore? Unless you really think it's worth it to sacrifice Harry for the greater good of the Wizarding World," Harry mused, all while laughing.

"Harry beat you as a child, Voldemort. Remember? What makes you think you'll pose any challenge to me?"

The good humor dropped instantly from Harry's face, which pleased Dumbledore. Whatever psychological edge he had planned to gain from this situation had been lost when he chose to banter rather than go straight for the kill.

With the last words exchanged, the two most powerful wizards in Britain raised their wands, and entered battle with one another.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Author Notes:

I hope that this chapter explained some of the questions that were out there regarding Harry's current situation. If anything isn't clear, just ask me in a review, and I'll clarify it to the best of my ability.

Sorry about the cliffhanger, but I felt twelve thousand words was enough, and I really wanted to get another chapter out. The next chapter should be out mid-June.

Any comments, suggestions or criticisms would be deeply appreciated. I'll make an effort to answer every review I get.

Thanks to darklordmike for his valuable suggestions with plotting, characterization, continuity and grammar.

Thanks to the lovely Lillith Nocturne for the beta work on this chapter.

Thanks for the help in the planning stages, BajaB and charmscharles.

Thanks for reading.

Third Movement: Surth Lit the Earth

August 27, 1990

With the verbal exchanges over, the most powerful Light wizard in Britain, Albus Dumbledore, stared down Harry Potter, who by some unknown means had been possessed by the supposedly vanquished Lord Voldemort. With a hundred year chasm between the combatants, the future of the Wizarding world at stake, it was Dumbledore who cast the first spell.

Dumbledore led off with a lightning-quick, silent Expelliarmus. With unnatural speed, Harry dropped to the ground and rolled backwards, disappearing under the bed. He popped up on the other side, and banished the bed at Dumbledore.

All signs and limitations of age forgotten, Dumbledore jumped over the rapidly approaching bed, Harry's Parseltongue chants ringing in his ears. The incantation died away as his boots hit the floor with a loud clack. He felt a huge surge of magic from the other side of the room, and hurricane force winds battered at him. The heavy winds picked him up and threw him against the wall, where he hit with a painful thud. He deduced his opponent had set up runic carvings across the room, activated by Parseltongue, as to not tip him off as to their effect, never intending to cross wands.

He brought up his wand just in time to swat away Harry's two cutting curses, and jumped up off the bed as Harry began another Parseltongue incantation. He felt a slight magical disturbance on either side of him, followed by the faint aroma of ozone. With a quick wave of his wand, he peeled up the floorboards on either side of him, and turned the warped wood into copper on the down-swing.

A mighty crash echoed through the room as lightning erupted from either side of the room, striking Dumbledore's makeshift shields with a violent flash, showering him with bright sparks. He squinted as minor spots danced across his vision, trying to compensate for his dilated pupils.

Harry quickly began spraying jets of oil at Dumbledore. He responded by jabbing his wand forward, and transfigured the oil into water. From that position, he swished his wand down, and snapped off a wordless silencing spell, followed by a stunner.

Harry spun around to the left of the silencer, then dropped to the ground to avoid the second crimson spell, all while chanting in Parseltongue. Dumbledore couldn't help but marvel at the speed his adversary wielded. It was completely unnatural, which led him to the conclusion he was using some sort of speed-enhancing artifact. He quickly deduced a change of tactics was in order.

"Solis exarsus!" Dumbledore yelled while slashing his wand vertically and squeezing his eyes tightly shut. Harry let out an inarticulate cry of pain and rage as the "Solar Flare" spell burned his retinas, interrupting his current chant.

Eyes shut tight; Dumbledore heard the charged runes begin to emit a high pitched whine, indicating the Harry had gotten the activation off, but not the release. He conjured a physical shield seconds before another blast shook the room, as the overloaded runes detonated. Bits of wood and plaster bounced harmlessly off his shield, and he heard Harry start up another incantation.

He felt plaster dust enter into his lungs, eliciting a deep cough. Gasping for air, Dumbledore blindly cast a silencer at the direction of the chant, and heard it deflect off a shield. The spell interrupted Harry's incantation, allowing Dumbledore the time to cast a few quick filtering charms. With his air intake free from particulate, he opened his eyes, to find small yellow dots dancing across his vision. Cold liquid stuck his body, and the thick stench of oil assaulted his nostrils.

Through the retreating yellow haze, he spied Harry blindly conjuring oil in every direction, thoroughly soaking the room. He transfigured the oil seeping into his clothes into water just as Harry finished the incantation.

A thick column of flame shot from the ceiling, igniting the large pool of oil on the floor. Dumbledore quickly began casting flame-freezing charms at the spreading column of fire, preventing the spread. Through the rising flames he saw Harry cast a healing spell upon his right eye, which negated the advantage Dumbledore currently held, but he needed to make sure the orphanage didn't burn down.

The fire contained, he took aim with his wand, and began to vanish the oxygen fueling the flames. Within moments, the oxygen-deprived

fires faded down to smolders, unable to sustain themselves. Harry took the opportunity, and flung an off-target blasting curse, which missed him and impacted into the wall behind him, blowing a hole into the hallway. However competent his opponent was, he was no Mad-Eye, and was not used to fighting with one eye. He smiled slightly, realizing that Harry's aim was probably going to be horrible from now on, which called for another change in strategy.

With a wave of his wand, he began to banish large pieces of flaming wood at Harry, who dodged out of the way of the first two. The third piece struck Harry in the chest, knocking him backwards, into the opposite wall. Just as he thought, Harry, one eye still shut tight, was having trouble tracking the fast-moving projectiles. He began to banish another piece when he saw Harry's open eye widen, at something behind him.

"What's going on?" a small, timid voice asked from behind Dumbledore. He whirled around to see a slight little girl with blonde hair taking in the devastation of bedroom with a wide-eyed curiosity, through the large hole in the wall. He heard the slight movements of a wand slicing through the air behind him, and threw up a magical shield in front of the wall. Harry's cutter bounced off the shield, mere feet from the girl's neck.

A cold rage descended upon Dumbledore as he turned, and began to banish more debris at Harry, with a higher velocity than previous. Harry responded by immediately throwing up a physical shield, which the debris harmlessly impacted off of. Dumbledore realized he'd have to go harder than he wanted to on Harry, as he couldn't risk innocent muggles being dragged into their conflict.

He brought his wand backwards, and levitated the bed. Harry only had time to widen his single eye as Dumbledore banished the bed at him. It struck his physical shield at high speeds, driving him into the wall with a loud crunch. The shield dropped away, and the bed collapsed on him, leaving a deep, boy-sized imprint in the sheetrock. Only his unmoving feet stuck out from under the lip of the upturned bed.

Satisfied, Dumbledore turned and surveyed the frightened looking girl.

"It's okay, what's your name, little girl?" Dumbledore asked, grandfatherly smile upon his face.

"Amanda," the girl whispered in response.

"Well, Amanda, it's very dangerous in this part of the house right now, so Harry and I are trying to fix this. Can you go tell your friends that it's not safe here, and that they should go down to the first floor?"

The girl nodded once, before turning and bounding ungracefully down the hallway. He let out a sigh of relief at her departure, and cast a muggle-repelling charm on the hallway, to prevent any more curious parties.

He heard slight scuffling behind him, and whirled around quickly. Nothing seemed amiss, as Harry's feet, clad in black sneakers, were still unmoving. He aimed his wand at the feet and cast a stunner, not wanting to take any chances. The red spell struck the shoes with a minor detonation, spraying wooded splinters, just as an arm snuck around the mattress and fired off a killing curse. He dove to the side, the sickly curse missing him by inches, Harry's hastily transfigured foot trick almost successful.

He hit the ground ungracefully, feeling every bit his age, as the sound of Parseltongue struck his ears. He noticed the slight smell of ozone again as he jumped to his feet. With a deft movement, he jumped through the hole in the wall, as a solid column of lightning arced behind him with a deafening thunderclap.

He landed hard on the tiled hallway floor, and rolled to the side. He came out of the roll with wand raised, and cast a complex illusion of himself, sending it through the hole he had come from. He then turned to the bedroom door, and blasted it inwards, off its hinges. The door hit the ground with a mighty crash, just in time for him to see a green killing curse pass through his unfazed illusionary doppelganger.

Harry had only the time to register brief surprise upon his bloodied face, courtesy of his still dripping, smashed nose before Dumbledore banished the door at him. He deftly jumped over it, but Dumbledore summoned it back immediately. It crashed into the back of Harry's calves, cutting out his legs from under him. He landed on his back

with a crash, sending forth a bloody mist from his lips, causing Dumbledore to wince. He was hurting Harry's body worse than intended.

Harry, still on his back, began another Parseltongue activation. He rolled in the opposite direction of Dumbledore's stunner, and completed the incantation. He felt thick waves of magic emanating from the ceiling, and mentally called out to his familiar. He heard Harry give out a cry of rage as Fawkes appeared next to him in a flash of flames, and teleported him out of the room just as many sharp spikes of ice descended from the ceiling.

He reappeared at the start of the hallway, far from Harry's room at the end. He mentally thanked his familiar through their bond, which Fawkes responded to with a short burst of song. He cast a modified one-way muggle-repelling charm on the staircase, which would keep any more from ascending to this floor, but allowed for escape from the destruction and mayhem.

With the hallway secured, Dumbledore took off towards the other end, his familiar gracefully flying beside him, all traces of age forgotten. Due to the complexity of the attack, with each ice spike needing its own carving, Dumbledore was fairly sure that was meant to be Harry's final runic attack. He was feeling rather good about the chances, now that his opponent's main offensive weapon had depleted itself, and it seemed ill at ease using Harry's magical core, with no access to the Dark spells Voldemort favored. Right before the door, he cast a magical shield, and walked into the room, shield held aloft. He slowed as he entered the room, and fear replaced his earlier resolve to strike down Harry, his earlier confidence evaporated.

The floor separating the two was completely shattered from the last runic attacks, like the surface of the moon after a meteor shower. Voldemort, wearing Harry's body, stood against the far wall, a taunting smile upon his face. His arms were extended to either side of him, wands grasped tightly, both pointed slightly downwards. On the floor, in the direct trajectory of his aimed wands, were two children. At first glance they seemed dead, but a second revealed the engorged veins, which was a tell-tale sign that the Draught of Living Death had been employed. Dumbledore was fairly sure these were the two missing boys Mrs. Cole had spoken of.

"Dumbledore, I'm pleased to have you back." Harry mockingly welcomed, blood dribbling from the corners of his mouth. He must have internal injuries from the banished bed, which caused him to wince mentally.

"Did you think I wouldn't come back, and miss out such a unique chance to catch up with an old student?" he asked in a level, conversational tone.

"Yes, I suppose a scholar such as yourself would never pass up such an opportunity," Harry answered.

"Yet, we have so much to catch up on, why bring two Muggles into our reunion?" Dumbledore questioned.

Harry let out a cold laugh. "I'll give you points for demanding nothing of me, but as it stands, I'll require something from you before freeing the muggle children. And yes, your assumptions are correct; I have not harmed them at all, but they have ingested some Draught of Living Death. I knew I shouldn't have just left it on my desk."

"What would you require of me, to let the muggles go?"

"Oh, a small gesture of goodwill."

Harry paused long enough to throw an evil smile in his direction, before continuing.

"Just your wand."

Dumbledore rather expected those terms, but had no intention of doing as he was asked. One doesn't ascend to be such a respected wizard without having to make some tough decisions in their lifetime, a fact he was well-acquainted with. While his heart ached, in some situations reason must overrule emotion. If he parted with his wand, everyone died, and an incarnation of Voldemort had free reign.

"I'm sorry, but I'm afraid I can't do that," Dumbledore answered, all traces of joviality gone from his voice. He contacted Fawkes through their bond, and told him to be ready.

When Harry replied, it was not with words. Two bright green curses erupted from his pointed wands, and Dumbledore sprang into action.

He wordlessly summoned the boy on the right, while Fawkes intercepted the other killing curse, disintegrating in a flash of fire and feathers.

He began to slash his wand to the right to conjure a shield, but Harry's Expelliarmus struck him in the chest, knocking him backwards slightly and sending his wand flying into the middle of the room. The spell didn't delay him long, but enough for Harry to jump forward and snatch up his left hand, his spare wand already returned to his back pocket.

Dumbledore looked on helplessly at the young child raised his own wand against him, a look of satisfaction upon his face.

"I'm see you warmed up to my idea, and relinquished your wand, Dumbledore," Harry stated, glee written across his features.

He remained silent to his adversary's taunts, as he knew Voldemort could never be reasoned with.

"As much as I'd like to taunt you about being beat by a ten-year old, the Aurors and Obliviators are probably on their way, since I'm sure the perimeter runes for my magic suppressing field were destroyed during the fight. Farewell, Dumbledore."

Time seemed to slow for Dumbledore, as he stared into the cold, dark eyes of the child that was supposed to save them from the Dark Lord. As green light began to gather at the tip of his own wand, he saw Harry's eyes change from their dark green, to the bright green that Lily Potter had been so well-known for. The green glow at the end of his wand faded, before it was lowered.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry, once again in control of his body, lowered the wand and tossed it to the old man, who was apparently called Dumbledore. He reached behind him and gathered the spare wand sticking out his back pocket, and threw both of the wands into hallway. All weapons accounted for; Harry raised his hands in the universal signal of surrender, which took a lot of effort on his behalf. His whole body hurt, it seemed like the asshole that possessed him had been really careless with his body.

More than anything, he wanted to fall down at this wonderful, strange man's feet, for giving him a chance to escape his mental captivity, but he was painfully aware that time was short.

"Dumbledore, I don't have much time. I've taken back control, but he's stronger than me," Harry rapidly spoke. He noticed that despite the shock, Dumbledore's face was filled with hope, and even more useful, comprehension.

He outstretched his left hand, which was bare to the naked eye.

"It did something to hide it, but there's a ring on my left thumb. I think that's what's been possessing me."

Dumbledore quickly pointed his wand at his left thumb, and started whispering unintelligible words. After several seconds, the cloaking disappeared, revealing the cursed gold ring. He heard a sharp intake of breath from Dumbledore upon seeing the ring. Much to Harry's surprise, the old man seemed to recognize it.

Before he could react, he felt the presence take control. He fought back with all his might, but it was like holding back the tide. The feeling in his legs slipped away, and he clattered to the ground, his nerves dead to any impact with the floor. He tried to open his mouth to warn Dumbledore, but the presence completed its takeover, and he felt himself pushed back into his mind.

He was thrust back through the hole he had created in his Occlumency shields, landing awkwardly upon the grass. His childhood home loomed directly in front of him, about thirty feet away. The hungry sound of crackling flames tore his eyes from the house, to the breach in the shield. Green fire began to stream through, ignoring him. He watched helplessly as it advanced upon the house, torching everything that it touched. Within moments, the entire house had become a giant pyre.

Warm liquid formed at the corners of his eyes at his childhood home burned, but no tears actually fell. When he crossed through to regain control of his body, he knew this was going to happen, but it was a sacrifice he had to make if he were to have any chance to free himself. At least he had been afforded the time to take some precautionary measures.

He saw the green fire move away from the burning house, and rush towards him. The huge, fiery mass then began to contract into itself, shrinking in size until it was vaguely man-shaped. Without warning the flames disappeared, leaving behind a being humanoid in shape, but seemingly reptile in ancestry. It was tall and thin, with skin so pale it was almost white, in sharp contrast to the dark robes it wore. Its eyes were the color of blood, more akin to something out a nightmare. It didn't really seem to have a nose, just flat slits that would be at home upon a snake.

Harry took an unconscious step backwards. When he had dreamed of confronting his captor, he had assumed a man of some sorts, whom he would vent his frustrations upon. This thing, whatever it was, scared the fucking shit out of him, and drained him of any bold thoughts he may have once entertained.

It sized him up for a second. Harry could almost feel the malevolent gaze crawling across his body. He saw it began to open its mouth, and began to involuntarily shiver. This thing looked like evil incarnate, and dread built within him at what venomous words it would spew forth.

"I must admit, Harry, I am most impressed by your Occlumency shields. Weak things that they were, you must possess an almost unparalleled drive and determination if you've delved into the mental arts at such a young age," he stated in a voice that was high and rasping, almost alien in its sound.

The creature paused then, as if expecting a reply from Harry, who had none to give.

"I, Lord Voldemort, value that type of person. I would be more than willing to spare you, as with time you could become a formidable ally, if you would supply me with the combination to the safe," it said, eyes almost curious.

Once he had found out he was possessed, he had taken every single memory that resided within the house, and stored it within the large vault in the basement. He knew that someone had constructed it within his mind, but no longer knew whom. All memories prior to his arrival at the orphanage had been purged from mind. While he didn't know what they were, he assumed the memories must have been fairly important, if he went to the trouble of hiding them.

Harry didn't answer, which caused Voldemort's face to darken.

"I need to know what happened that Halloween night, and how a mere child managed to defeat the greatest sorcerer who ever lived," Voldemort spat, eyes awash with malice.

Harry had no intention of giving anything to this "Voldemort". He failed to see why anyone would ever cooperate with this evil entity, regardless of how badly they may have been threatened.

"I don't even know the code," Harry whispered.

"What?" Voldemort questioned, his voice indicating massive pain to an unsatisfactory answer.

Harry swallowed deeply, before replying, "I locked the code inside."

Voldemort focused his intense gaze upon his eyes after his admission, searching for some hint of a lie. His search was in vain, however, as Harry had indeed done just as he had said. He couldn't risk anyone finding the code, and finding the knowledge contained within. Harry supposed that he must have had some sort of contingency before the purge, which would have allowed him to access the code without his former memories.

He hoped.

Voldemort eventually came to the conclusion that he had told the truth.

"Well, Harry, it seems you threw away your only chance to save yourself," Voldemort said, as his body began to disappear into a column of green flames.

He turned and ran, back towards the breach in his shields. He didn't know what Dumbledore had been doing since he'd lost control, but had hoped he had found some way to separate him and the ring.

With the breach mere feet away, Harry felt the hot breath of fire upon the back of his neck. With a mighty heave, Harry jumped through the breach, and entered back into control of his body.

As his earthly senses returned, he saw Dumbledore pointing his wand at the ring, whispering. "Shit," Harry thought, he probably hadn't figured out how to remove it yet.

"Dumbledore!" Harry yelled, breaking him from his investigation.

The old man's head immediately flew up in response.

"He's coming, you've got to get rid of it, he broke through m...."

Harry's last words trailed off into a scream as the flames caught up to his consciousness. A blinding agony wracked him as the green wrapped around him, consuming him.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

The shock of seeing Tom Riddle's ring, the same one he had stolen from his uncle, Morfin, hit Dumbledore like a bucket of cold water. It also provided the context he needed, bringing some sort of order to the situation. While he was curious as to how it exactly possessed him, and who sent it to him, other matters took clear precedence.

He glanced into Harry's eyes, and while they retained their green vibrancy, they were dull, glazed over. With a heavy heart, he surmised that Voldemort must have pulled his consciousness back into his mind, but hadn't bothered to come forth and take control. For whatever reason, Voldemort must have found that whatever resided in Harry's mind to be of more urgent attention.

Dumbledore moved closer to Harry's still, upright form, and pointed his wand at the ring upon Harry's left thumb. He had to figure out what exactly the ring was before he could attempt to remove it from Harry's hand. He sent a very thin, opaque blue ribbon of magic from his wand, which almost functioned as an extra appendage. It moved toward Harry's hand, and he tried to snake it under Harry's thumb. He felt the ring contract against the appendage, and immediately canceled the unique spell. The display suggested that the magic governing the ring was far stronger than anticipated, if it could change its shape.

This development worried Dumbledore deeply; as it was apparent this was no simple Dark Artifact. A Dark Artifact typically only had a single charm or spell cast upon it, as most inanimate objects had no

active magic, and couldn't handle the magical stress of multiple enchantments. Since it could change its shape, possess people, and contained very detailed memories of Voldemort, he could only deduce that the ring contained active magic.

Active magic was only present in Wizards, magical beings, and the soul itself. The ring clearly could not have been a magical being, even though it did possess the memories of Voldemort. Could Voldemort have imprinted his memories upon the ring? After a moment of thought, cold dread spread across his being, as an old memory surfaced from the depths of his mind, an incomplete one that he had coaxed from Horace Slughorn.

"Sir, do you know anything about Horcruxes?"

While he only had his direct observations to go on, based upon his knowledge of Horcruxes, he felt sure his hypothesis was correct. Voldemort had seemed to become less human as the years progressed, so it was more than conceivable that splitting one's soul caused a degenerative condition where the Wizard who created the Horcrux would gradually transform from their human form into something evil. It made sense, as with all Dark Arts, there was always a price attached, which was usually proportional to the power granted.

Dumbledore let out a deep sigh of discontent. If it indeed was a Horcrux, as he now believed, then he was far out of his league. His knowledge of the evil artifacts was limited to the few books that mentioned the subject, which usually offered conflicting information. One of the few tidbits that seemed consistent with every book was that the Horcrux would be completely aware of its surroundings. Also, most of the books seemed to agree that since the soul contained active magic, many different charms and protections could be placed upon the ring, and could be activated by the consciousness inhabiting the ring at any time it wished.

This information suggested to Dumbledore that he wouldn't be able to simply pry the ring off Harry's finger. It had changed its shape when he had merely tried to move it. What would it be capable of if he tried to remove it?

With a heavy heart, he moved backwards out of the room, keeping a close on Harry, who still seemed to be comatose. He picked up the

ash wand that Harry had flung into hallway, and returned to the room. Any alternative to the idea he had in mind was preferable, but he just didn't want to risk the ring killing or permanently harming Harry if it sensed him trying to remove the ring. If Harry began to thrash, the severing charm he wanted to use may hit a vital organ. He resigned himself to the fact he may have to use an alternate method.

Dumbledore began whispering random snatches of incantations from traditionally Light-sided rituals, to see if any of them reacted with the ring, to give him a better idea what sort of protections were on the ring, and if he could disable any of them.

"Dumbledore!" Harry yelled, panic evident in his voice.

His investigations were broken by the sudden outburst from Harry, prompting him to level his wand at the child. He was relieved to note the eyes were still bright green, suggesting Harry was in control.

"He's coming, you've got to get rid of it, he broke through m...."

Harry's warning dissolved into a scream of agony, an anguished cry that penetrated him to his core. He dropped to the ground, and began to thrash wildly, as if under an invisible Cruciatus curse.

All indecision dropped away as Dumbledore raised both wands. He banished Harry's hand with his wand, and summoned his left thumb with the spare wand, pouring forth all his magic into both spells.

His thumb was ripped from his hand in a small glut of blood, while his body was pushed backwards with the force of the banisher. He flopped ungracefully to the floor, making no effort to hold himself up. The severed thumb hit Dumbledore in the chest, and bounced off, landing on the floor.

He ignored the Dark artifact for the time-being, and rushed to Harry's side. Relief washed over him as he observed that Harry was still breathing, if a bit raggedly. It seemed that the sudden disconnect from the invading presence had knocked him out, which was probably for the better, considering the state his body was in. The air intake through his crushed nose was ragged, and his irregular breaths through his mouth, along with the blood that

continued to seep from the corners of his mouth, suggested more severe internal injuries than he originally thought.

The thumb looked the worst, however. He had never tried to simultaneously banish and summon something at the same time. The crimson-stained bone of Harry's thumb stuck out from his hand, torn flesh and gristle hanging down. He had always been told attempting to summon body parts was a fickle exercise, but he never had any practical experience with it, until now.

With a complicated wave of his wand, he transfigured some of the surrounding wood shrapnel into a wooden box. He levitated the rest of Harry's thumb into it, which looked like a half filled, bloody sausage without the bone frame. The flesh touching the ring had already begun to scorch, which increased his confidence that he had made the right decision. He sealed off the box, and placed it into his pocket.

He then turned to his fallen familiar, who hadn't hesitated before throwing itself into the path of a killing curse meant for an innocent child. Fawkes rested upon the floor, surrounded by ashes, in its admittedly ugly newborn form. He carefully picked Fawkes up, and uttered a single "Thank you" to his longtime friend, before placing the newborn phoenix in a velvet lined pocket inside his suit.

With a slight movement, he summoned the third wand to himself, and stuck in his back pocket, along with the ash wand Harry had predominantly used.

When he moved backed to Harry's side, he noticed a small pool of blood forming where Harry's thumb had been torn off. Guilt assaulted him for a moment, before he shook it off, not having the time for such a useless feeling right now. He cast a numbing charm on the hand, before cauterizing the wound with a brief blast of flames from his wand. In all probability, Harry wouldn't have felt it, but he didn't want to take a chance. There was no way for him to tell just how deeply Harry's consciousness had been damaged by Voldemort's final attack, and Dumbledore wanted Healers there when Harry finally did awake.

Dumbledore considered for a second summoning a Healer here, but with the apparent depths of Harry's injuries, he was going to need some serious work, that only St. Mungo's could provide. He had

been told by trained Healers that if it's absolutely necessary to move an injured person, it was preferable to do so via Portkey, being less exertive on the body than Apparation.

The young muggles he felt he could safely leave behind. He was certain that their earlier battles had shattered the wards Voldemort had most likely placed to mask all magical activity, and the Aurors and Obliviators would arrive at any moment. While he didn't feel good about leaving the two innocent boys under the thrall of the Draught of Living Death behind, they were in no immediate danger.

Harry, however, was.

He summoned a shredded pillow from the far side of the room, which flew to him, trailing feathers down behind it as it traveled. He quickly transformed it into a Portkey, and placed his hand upon Harry. In a flash of light, both of the wizards disappeared from the ruined room, leaving only an oppressive silence in their wake.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

The evening proved tense for Dumbledore. After confirming that Harry was in stable condition, he used one of the owls that St. Mungo provided for emergency use, and sent a letter to the head of the DMLE, Amelia Bones. While the majority of the Ministry had become an all-encompassing bureaucracy since the events of Voldemort's demise, its only production being vast amounts of useless paperwork, there were still a few quality witches and wizards who held roles of importance within the Ministry. The letter apologized for the disaster at the orphanage, and requested an audience, as soon as possible.

While sitting in the waiting room, several hours after sending his letter, a tawny owl arrived with his reply clutched in its talons, the letter bearing the tell-tale crimson of a Howler. This wasn't exactly unexpected. He cast a quick muffliato around him, as to not disturb the rest of the building. He then applied a quick sound-dampening charm on his ears, as to retain use of his hearing. With the preparations complete, he opened the letter.

"Strange as it may sound, Dumbledore, I want to talk to you. I, however, will not request an audience. I demand a fucking audience. In fact, if you and your fruity robes don't show up here tonight, I'm

pulling all the Aurors off their current cases, and sending them after your ancient, wrinkled ass.

You must be completely fucking senile if you think you're wriggling out of this one. I don't care if you're the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot or not. You could be tossing Fudge's salad for all I care, and even his impotent ass wouldn't be able to save you from my wrath.

It's entirely your fault that I'm here instead of at home, so if I'm going to suffer from lack of sleep, I'm going to spread the joy to you. Get down here. Now."

The message completed, the Howler immediately began to shred itself into pieces, which in turn caught fire. Within moments the only remnants of the scathing message were ashes on the floor.

It seemed that Madam Bones had loaded the Howler with every ounce of frustration she had encounter during the last day, and wished to adequately convey it. He expected this from her. A proud Gryffindor, she was prone to large temper tantrums when given bad news. She would be fine though by the time he reached her office, most of her initial anger spent.

He hoped so anyway.

A few minutes later found Dumbledore striding through the halls of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement purposefully. The halls were almost empty, as most of the DMLE staff worked the day shift, other than an occasional Auror working a case late into the night.

He passed through the cramped rows of enclosed squares that passed for the offices of the low-level Aurors, and entered into the hallway that house the offices of the higher-ranking DMLE officials. Portraits of former prominent members of the department lined the walls, slumbering within their frames. At the very end of the hall lay Amelia's office, which he stopped at. However much she may rage at him, he knew he had to convince her that his actions were not irrational, but backed by logic.

In the new Ministry that had risen over the past ten years, so many new departments had been created, that the actual chain of command was very unclear. If one of Dumbledore's many political

enemies tried to make a run at him, it would be very helpful to still have the Head of the DMLE on his side.

Beyond the simple political ramification, however, it was undeniable that Madam Bones was a good person. While she did possess a rather abrasive disposition when at work, it was all a smoke-screen, a persona she put up to intimidate the weak-willed hacks that currently infested the English Wizarding government. However, she had never stooped to the depth of political backstabbing and dishonesty that most politicians succumbed to. It also didn't hurt that she was aligned to the Light.

They had been allies during the first Wizarding War. The inside tips provided by Madam Bones to Dumbledore had saved many lives, the crowning achievement being the prevention of the poisoning of Hogwarts students by house-elves owned by Dark families. He had repaid her in turn, helping her to rise to the head of the DMLE.

The sudden appearance of Nymphadora Tonks also weighed heavily upon his mind. While he hadn't a great deal of contact with the bright Hufflepuff, his few interactions had painted him a specific picture, one that clashed with the young woman that had visited his office earlier that day. The fine young woman who had attended his school had possessed a child-like, endearing lack of composure when in the presence of authority figures. She had always been unable to hide her nervousness, and usually distracted herself with a repetitive movement of some sort. Lightly tapping her feet upon the floor, rolling a quill between her thumb and forefinger, it was always something.

The harried-looking young woman who had entered his office showed none of these nervous character traits. It had struck him as strange at the time, but he hadn't spared much thought to it, since it was easily explained away by the shock of her discovering the whereabouts of Harry Potter.

Now, he was far less convinced. The more pieces of information he received, the worse it looked. The elaborate attacks that Harry used against him would need significant time to be carved and formed, and had clearly been premeditated. Furthermore, runes of that complexity needed specialized magical materials to function correctly, materials that were unavailable to a child at a muggle orphanage. While he could envision Harry adorning a cloak and

venturing into Knockturn Alley to acquire the materials needed, there was no way he could have acquired a spare wand from Ollivander, as he wouldn't sell spare wands to minors.

If Nymphadora had indeed been put under the Imperious Curse, and ordered to lure Dumbledore into a trap, who had cast the Unforgivable? Harry, possessed by Voldemort, certainly had the ability to cast it, but who had provided him with the wand in the first place? It pained him to admit it, but it seemed like there was another, third person involved in all of this. Considering that Nymphadora and Harry were both certainly not Death Eaters, and Severus' claim that the Dark Mark had become active again, it suggested that Voldemort had managed to make contact with a Death Eater. As much as he hoped otherwise, he couldn't help but think that dark days were once again upon Britain.

With a heavy sigh, he knocked three times upon the heavy mahogany door, each impact echoing through the silent halls. He would have more time to follow his own thoughts later, as the Director deserved his full attention at this time.

"Come in," implored a tired-sounding voice from within.

Dumbledore did as instructed, and entered the office, closing the door behind him. Amelia Bones sat behind her desk, her mouth a single horizontal line upon her face, as if she were forcefully holding back volatile retorts. Her short gray hair was mussed, and her eyes were bloodshot, indicating an unpleasant mix of fatigue. Her trademark monocle was even missing, and she did not seem very pleased to see him.

"Good evening, Madam Bones," he said to the exhausted woman. He waited for a moment, but no reply was forthcoming. He pressed on though, determined.

"I realize the hour is late, but thank you for agreeing to see me. I apologize for all the inconveniences I've caused-"

He was cut off by her raised right hand, imploring him to stop, which he did. She let out a heavy sigh, before addressing him.

"Dumbledore, do you have any idea the shit I've had to wade through to clear this situation up?" Amelia asked, her voice full of displeasure.

He stayed silent, as she really wasn't looking for an answer, but looking to vent. He was more than happy to indulge her, as he imagined her day was very stressful, and he really was partially to blame, even if he was left without any alternative.

"Well, since you really don't seem to have any idea, I'll tell you. The warning of lethal spell-fire being exchanged in a muggle location was broadcast to every sub-department of the DMLE, even the fucking useless ones that have popped into existence over the past ten years. Muggle Relations got there first, seeing as they usually don't do a solitary fucking thing anyway, and were currently free. Once the bureaucratic twats showed up, every single one of those Ministry hacks, that don't give a flying fuck about muggles at all, they started handing out memory charms like candy. The Obliviators arrived next, and were understandably livid that Muggle Relations was attempting to do their job, and just creating a larger clusterfuck. It almost came to spell-fire between the two departments, over jurisdictional bullshit."

She stopped her rant for a second, to give Dumbledore another glare, which he felt he weathered quite well. Unfazed by his lack of response, she continued.

"It gets even better. The Aurors arrived on scene next, and started to clear the area, to make sure everything was alright. Whomever had fought on the second floor, had put up Muggle-repelling charms. Well, the brain-donors in the Muggle Relations department decided to dispel the charms, without locking down the area. Minutes later, a girl comes running down, screaming something about two boys being killed. This spread like Fiendfyre over the already frightened children, and before we know it, we've got an ocean of kids thinking they're going to be killed. The Aurors lose their composure at this point, and begin threatening the Muggle Relations assholes, with good reason. They, of course, choose not to let themselves be bullied, and hold their ground, and start talking jurisdiction again. I had to go down there personally and set them straight."

She paused for a second, catching her breath, before continuing.

"I had some of the Aurors check out the second floor, to see if anyone's actually dead. We find there's two children that had been dosed with Draught of Living Death, within a room that's been extraordinarily fucked up by some powerful spells being exchanged. Looks like maybe someone else might have been hurt, since there's blood on the floor, and these kids don't have a mark on them. So, we figure we'll talk to the head of the orphanage, see if she can provide a roster. Well, apparently Muggle Relations was hell-bent on ruining my day, since they Obliviated her as well, only she now doesn't really know what an orphanage is, let alone how to operate one. Of course, no one's owning up to doing it. For some unfathomable reason, the paperwork from the office had been confiscated, and no one knows where it went. For fuck's sake, it was like Muggle Relations was intentionally trying to fuck this all up!"

Amelia deflated as she finished her rant. All her venom was spent, leaving behind only a tired woman at the tail end of a horribly busy day. She almost seemed to age before his eyes.

"I'm sorry, it's been a long, very trying day. However it occurred, you probably had a good reason for doing whatever you did."

"That's quite alright." Dumbledore replied.

"So, Albus, care to tell us why we needed three teams of Obliviators dispatched to a muggle orphanage today?"

If he were dealing with anyone else in the Ministry, he probably have kept Harry's reappearance in the Wizarding world secret, and not have bothered to contact the DMLE in the first place. However, Amelia was an ally, and he felt she deserved an explanation for the hubris of today, as well as some good news to end the day.

"Earlier today, I was contacted by a member of the Office of Muggleborn Education. They had made an interesting discovery at a muggle orphanage in London, and this person told me about it, against the wishes of their department head."

He could see that the vague terms he spoke in were not endearing himself to Amelia's agitated frame of mind, but wanted to ease into what would be a large shock.

"This situation required my immediate attention, so I set out. After a quick meeting with the director, I went up to the room of a supposedly muggleborn orphan. Amelia, it turned out not to be a muggleborn child at all, but one from our world, with magical parents."

Amelia perked up from her barely concealed contempt at this statement, eyes alert once more.

"Albus, do we know who the parents are?" she asked.

Dumbledore let out a small smile.

"James and Lily Potter." Dumbledore replied.

The head of the DMLE was known for being utterly unflappable in the face of the unexpected. It was said it would take an earth-shattering revelation to get her to even bat an eye.

Amelia Bones' jaw dropped at his explanation, hope shining in her eyes.

"Dumbledore...are you sure it's him?" she asked in a low whisper.

He gave a hearty chuckle.

"Yes, I'm sure. He has Lily's exact eyes, James' exact messy black hair. You can rest assured, it's definitely him. Somehow...he survived."

His voice was heavy as he finished, which she picked up on.

"Dumbledore, what happened there today?"

He had decided, long before arriving, that he wouldn't be hiding any information from the Director. If the tide had begun to change, he wanted the branch of the Ministry that would be at the forefront of battle well-informed.

"When I met Harry Potter for the first time, he began speaking in familiar words that I had not heard for a long time. He was, somehow, possessed by Lord Voldemort."

Amelia looked absolutely horrified by this revelation.

"Dumbledore, how is that possible? Is Voldemort even dead?"

"Answering your second question first, I'm not sure. Based on what I saw today, there's a very good chance that he's still around, somewhere. Before I continue, though, I need you to understand that what I'm about to tell you can never leave this room. Can you do that?"

She looked hesitant for a while, but her trust in Dumbledore, despite her earlier ranting, prompted her nod her head quickly in agreement.

"Amelia, have you ever heard of a Horcrux?" he asked.

Her face immediately drew into a disgusted grimace.

"That's terribly dark magic, but I have heard of them. Did Voldemort create one, and that's why you think he may still be around?"

He nodded in response.

"Yes, he definitely made one. Sadly, it came into Harry Potter's hands, and up until today, he had been possessed by it. It drove him to try to kill me today, and he came very close to accomplishing that goal."

She covered one mouth with her hand, in disbelief. She held it there for a second, before slowly lowering it to the desk.

"Do you mean to say that Harry Potter had been possessed by a fragment of the Dark Lord's soul?"

He nodded solemnly in response.

"Will he ever recover?"

"Yes, I think so, physically anyway. I had to hurt him severely to separate him from the Horcrux, sadly, but the Healers informed me that all of his injuries were on the mend, and he should be fine within the week."

He paused, trying to find the right words for the hardest part.

"Mentally, we just don't know. Odd as it may seem, Harry seemed to have mental training. He was able to keep the Horcrux from devouring his mind and soul, which is a huge accomplishment for a ten year-old. Right before I separated him from the Horcrux, Voldemort struck one final time, and managed to do severe mental damage upon Harry. The Healers haven't been able to determine the extent, but they think he'll still be comatose long after he's physically healed."

Amelia looked crestfallen by the news, which prompted him to shine a ray of hope.

"However, I think with time, there's a possibility his mind will mend itself. Once he's physically healed, I plan on taking him to a secure location, and having Fawkes sing for him. If there's any traces of Voldemort still in him, continual exposure to the phoenix song should help out, hopefully reversing the damage done."

"Albus, what do you think the odds are of him recovering?"

"Honestly, I'm not sure. I had brief contact with him, when he had momentarily broken free of Voldemort's control. He seemed to have a conscious idea of what was going on, but he didn't spare a second on self-pity and did give me the information necessary to ultimately save him."

While far from reassured, slight relief flitted onto her features, since Harry had a chance of recovery. After a moment of thought, her face grew grave again.

"If Fudge discovers that Harry has re-surfaced, he's going to want to parade him around, and stick him with a politically aligned Pureblood family."

Dumbledore sighed at her deduction.

"Yes, I fear that you're absolutely correct. Right now, we're the only two people in Wizarding Britain that know that Harry Potter has returned. I would like to keep it that way until we're able to move Harry. Can I count on you to keep silent about this?"

Amelia was silent for a second, before adding in her own deep sigh.

"I don't like it, keeping the Wizarding World in the dark about this, but I don't see any other satisfactory way to go about doing it. Will you agree to at least inform the Daily Prophet once he's been released from St. Mungo's, and you've found a suitable home for him?"

He inclined his head.

"Certainly, but it has to be written to my specifications."

A grim smile found its way onto her face at this provision.

"I assume you'd like to keep the fact he was possessed by Voldemort under wraps."

"Indeed. The Wizarding world can never know of this. When he does attend Hogwarts, he's going to already face a great deal of suspicion, since we still don't know what happened that Halloween night. I think we'll just say it was a case of a former Voldemort supporter sending him a cursed artifact, which caused the mayhem that transpired that day. How much can your department keep under wraps?"

Amelia thought for a second before providing an answer.

"I think we'll be okay. No one there ever saw Harry, and all that was left behind were two muggles under the Draught of Living Death. No one really would have cared if they were hurt, but the Draught of Living Death might be suspicious. However, I don't think any of the agents from Muggle Relations saw anything, and they're the main pain in my ass. The Aurors I can keep under control. The only real problem I see, is with yourself. What are you going to do when the Minister demands to see Harry Potter?"

Dumbledore let out a chuckle.

"I'm not really too concerned about Cornelius. I have a very secure place where Harry will be safe from harm, and Fudge will never find him. Besides, it would hurt Fudge too deeply to take a run at me on the heels of such good news. He'd have to wait until the tide changed before he could even try. And even in that scenario, Amelia, I do not like our Minister's chances of finding me if I do not wish to be found."

Amelia let out her first genuine smile of the night at his declaration.

"Where do you plan to take him, once he's healed?" she asked, a hopeful curiosity in her voice.

The smile faded a little from Dumbledore's face at her question.

"I'm sorry, but I'm not going to be able to tell you. Fudge may deduce that you know, and try to ask you. He may pass some obscure law authorizing his right to use Veritaserum in the interests of security, so you need to be able to answer truthfully."

She didn't seem happy with his decision, but it wasn't entirely unexpected.

"I'd like to fight you on this one, but you do have a point."

She paused for a second, before continuing.

"There's still one thing that doesn't make sense to me. Based upon the strength of the spell damage around the room, Harry was throwing off some extremely powerful spells. Even possessed by Voldemort, Harry's magical core would still be relatively small and undeveloped. How was he able to cast such powerful spells?"

"Well, I believe there's two reasons. Firstly, and more importantly, his main method of attack were runic carvings activated by Parseltongue command."

"I didn't even know that was possible. Is there a Parseltongue runic set?" she asked, slight fear in her voice.

He shook his head.

"No, all of his attacks were elemental based. I assume that Parseltongue is a very basic language, mostly comprised of terms that a snake would be familiar with, such as fire, lightning and wind. I assume he sacrificed variety for the advantage of me being ignorant of the attack before it happened, as he knew of my wide knowledge of Ancient Runes."

His statement absorbed, a look of confusion settled upon her face.

"Albus, how does a child, even if he is possessed by Voldemort, gain access to all the materials needed for the runes?"

He took a deep breath before replying.

"Sadly, I'm almost certain he had an accomplice. Probably a former Death Eater, most likely the same one that sent Harry the ring in the first place."

Amelia reacted to this news by rubbing her temples vigorously.

"Are you implying that one of, if not more, of Voldemort's former servants are aware that their master still exists in some form?" she asked, her voice heavy with dread.

"I'm sorry to say, but yes." Dumbledore said softly.

"Well, then we obviously have to find out who aided Voldemort. Any ideas on where to start?" she asked.

One of his favorite qualities about Amelia was that she spent little time moping on a situation, instead opting to find a solution.

"My source was Nymphodora Tonks. She told me Harry's location, claimed that her boss, Charlotte Lewis, was keeping the discovery of Harry under wraps. I'd say those two are where we should start."

Amelia sighed heavily, again.

"Great, our top two leads are witches that I'm very fond of. Are you thinking that perhaps one, if not both of them, were placed under an Imperious by our mysterious accomplice?"

Dumbledore let a wry smile.

"Unless young Nymphodora has seriously fallen astray, and joined the Death Eaters."

She let out a small snort of laughter at his statement.

"Yes, not too likely. I'll send out some Aurors to gather the two of them, see what we can find out from them."

She was silent for a moment, in apparent contemplation, before deciding to ask the question.

"I don't want to belittle your magical skill, but how was he able to almost kill you with mere runic attacks?"

Dumbledore chuckled lightly in reply.

"While I wouldn't refer to a solid column of lightning as a minor obstacle, your point is well taken. Even though young Harry appears to only be about ten years old, I believe that wherever he was before he was found wandering on the side of the road, he had been practicing magic. This put him ahead of most children his age, and strengthened his magical core. Thankfully he hadn't any exposure to the Dark Arts, so Voldemort was limited to neutral and Light spells, but even that was enough to give me quite the challenge."

"Albus, wasn't he using Unforgivables?"

He sighed deeply in response.

"Yes, Amelia, he was. I need you to suppress anyone finding that though. As you're well aware, the reason Unforgivables are illegal is that they don't require the vast personal sacrifice that most of the Dark Arts require, only intense hatred. Anyone could use them if properly motivated, rather like an anti-Patronus. There's such a stigma attached to them that anyone caught using them would be automatically labeled a Dark wizard. Most of the time, this is completely accurate, but in young master Potter's case..."

She nodded in comprehension. It all came back to clearly establishing that Harry was not a Dark Wizard.

The two were silent for a moment, before Dumbledore rose from his seat.

"I believe you've had a long enough day, Amelia, and I've no desire to contribute further to it. If you don't have any other questions, I'll be on my way."

Amelia rose at his words, and stuck out her hand, which Dumbledore grasped.

"Take care of him, Dumbledore."

"I'll do my best, Amelia."

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

August 28, 1990

Octavius Pepper was not having the best of days. Being one of the few daring souls who participated in currency exchange between the muggle and Wizarding Worlds, he had met more than his fair share of worries and concerns.

The Pureblood aristocracy found fraternization of this degree to be distasteful, on top of his Muggleborn heritage. While overt retribution on their behalves was a rarity, he found himself the target of many looks of disdain and disgust. All this he could have easily tolerated, for one did not make it far in his profession without a thick skin, but their discrimination also extended to his business enterprises. Items that could be bought at wholesale by most Wizards, suddenly found themselves in short supply, and in high demand, when he found himself in need.

However, this paled in comparison to the grief he received from the Goblins. It was common knowledge that the Ministry really didn't give a flying fuck about the goblin populace, as long as they continued to grease the machine of Wizarding commerce. With the great deal of profit generated by goblins holding a near monopoly over Wizarding banking, they could afford to pay off the right politicians, to make lawbreakers of those who dared to challenge their self-proclaimed right to be the sole financial institution in Wizarding England.

He had begun to make his fortune by melting down the gold that comprised Galleons. The goblin molding process used a form of alchemy, still a mystery to wizards, which vastly increased the density of the gold, making it almost completely immune to counterfeiting. Due to this wonderful process, when melted down, the yield was far greater than the original mass would indicate. This information was useless in the Wizarding world, as the only ones buying gold were goblins, and they had the price of gold fixed.

It was not for nothing, however, that Octavius was a Muggleborn placed into Ravenclaw, born with innate business acumen. Muggle gold brokers had no such knowledge, and were perfectly happy to pay top dollar for his large yields of gold. Once changing his muggle currency back into Galleons, he often doubled his original investment.

That is, until the goblins got wind of his operation. Before he knew it, new laws had been passed, which spawned the Department of Magical Currency. This new branch of the government cast charms upon all newly minted Wizarding Currency, which alerted the Ministry if they happened to be tampered with in any fashion. Violators were hit with harsh fines, which more than negated any profit he would have made. All cries that the tracking charms were yet another violation of right to privacy fell upon deaf ears, as it was apparently more important to protect the "Ministry's" property, as it was now lawfully referred to as.

He eventually found other methods to prosper, but it was a constant struggle with the goblins. If litigation didn't work, they hired some of the many drug-addicts that riddled Knockturn Alley to loot one of his many properties. Indeed, what was the promise of lawful repercussions when compared to the immediate results of being paid for their next fix?

His latest troubles concerned the accursed Muggle Relations department. It had been bad enough dealing with the Magical Currency assholes, but the Muggle Relations hacks brought hypocrisy to a whole new level. It especially boiled his blood that the wizards in charge of interacting with the world he grew up with viewed it with disdain. Muggle Relations was one of the main places where politicians stashed wizards that had worked on their political campaigns. While this was certainly not a new concept to the Wizarding World, the degree to which it was abused had exploded since the abrupt end of the Wizarding War.

He didn't know if it was the goblins or purebloods that pushed it through, but there was a new measure on the floor of the Muggle Relations Wizengamot sub-committee that would prevent private ownership of muggle properties. Its supposed aim was to prevent the loss of wealth to the muggle world, which was clearly bullshit to anyone with a functioning cerebral cortex, especially since the

Ministry was still able to buy up muggle properties for "further expansion of the Wizarding world". There also was the loophole that all Ministry employees would be exempt from being labeled as a private citizen, since they were a public servant of the Ministry. As if this new government had any interest other than maintaining and expanding its own power base.

All his attempts to block this bit of law from going to a vote before the sub-committee had been met with stiff resistance. The Muggle Relations sub-committee, the voting body comprised almost completely of purebloods, would probably almost pass the bill unanimously. He had, in a last desperation move, made an appeal directly to the head of Muggle Relations, William Flint.

The mistake had been evident when a cruel smile had found its way onto the Director's face. He had informed Octavius that there would be a convening of the Wizengamot tomorrow, which he was expected to attend, where the matter could be discussed in an "open forum".

Unable to form a coherent response, he had just left the office. It was ridiculous, a full hearing with the judicial body over the simple right to commerce? They only met when there were charges to be brought against someone. Was he to be charged with something, regardless of how Flint had described the situation? Flint was a mean, bigoted motherfucker, whose name had often cropped up in rumor circles, linking him to muggle hunting. William Flint was the single best example of the duplicity that existed within the Muggle Relations department. How had the Ministry been allowed to settle into such a sad state?

In an effort to alleviate the frustration and stress the day had brought upon him, he had found his way to the Leaky Cauldron, and had every intention of drowning his troubles in vast quantities of alcohol. While normally a businessman of his immense wealth would retire to a "gentleman's club" for the type of solace he currently sought, he had been informed, in no uncertain terms, that he was not welcome to them. The male pureblood aristocracy was very protective of their tree houses. While he wouldn't have minded the ministrations and services of the gold-digging sluts that frequented those places, he did prefer the overall company of the Leaky Cauldron.

Tom, the wizened old barkeeper, was always quick with a drink and a smile, both of the warm variety. The talk was always more pleasant, and blood really wasn't of much importance.

Now, with an elbow upon the bar, and the calming flames of Firewhisky burning in his stomach, the pains of the day began to ebb.

It got even better when a woman who he had been examining approached his position at the bar.

"Do you mind a little company?" she asked, in a quiet, timid voice.

Turning to his right, he took her in more fully. She had long, black hair that hung down to her waist. Her face and skin were pale cream, her facial features soft, punctuated by light brown eyes, almost the color of honey. It created a distinct, but pleasant contrast to her dark hair.

He wouldn't have taken her for wealth, if it wasn't for the form-fitting silk robes she wore, which put her lithe body on display without cheapening it. They wouldn't have been out of place upon the form of some rich Pureblood's trophy wife.

Judging by the careful and shy quality to her question, and the complete unfamiliarity of her physical features, he guessed that she was a trophy wife, who had purchased some hairs from a dealer on Knockturn Alley. It was not widely advertised, but if one looked hard enough, the hairs of beautiful muggle women could be purchased. He had heard of lonely trophy wives, looking for any way to satisfy the itch their husbands long ago neglected, turning to Polyjuice to satiate their most primal of thirsts.

He gave her a wide smile.

"I would be delighted to enjoy your company." he said, taking pleasure in the slight flush that spread across her pale cheeks at this reply.

Besides, who was he to turn aside a damsel in need?

The next two hours passed in a blur, during which he exchanged increasingly flirtatious small talk with the lady, whose name turned

out to be "Belladonna". While he had to fight giggles at learning her alias for the night, it did provide for some exquisitely awful puns, which he used at every opportunity.

In between drinks, he noticed that she left the bar for the bathroom, roughly once an hour. She had probably kept a small amount of Polyjuice on her person. Where she hid it he could only hazard a guess, as her outfit didn't seem to allow much room for storage.

Directly following her second trip to the bathroom, he subtly suggested that they flee

the Leaky Cauldron and abscond to his bachelor pad mere blocks away. Not having any family, he currently found it convenient to not own a manor of his own.

She agreed quickly, and they immediately began a most unsteady journey back to his place, their alcoholic consumption causing their flight to be far less than smooth.

He had not even closed the door before he found himself pushed up against the door, slamming it shut. The taste of firewhiskey met his taste buds as her mouth parted his, their tongues entwining. His fingers laced beneath the folds in her robe, finding the smooth skin of her back. She moaned deeply into his mouth, and pressed her body more tightly into his, her hardened nipples pressing delightfully into his midsection.

Without warning she broke the kiss. His initial disappointment faded when she roughly grabbed his hand, and pulled him towards the bedroom. With an apparently newfound sense of daring, she pushed him to a sitting position upon the bed, and tore off his cumbersome robes, depositing them carelessly upon the floor.

He was left in only his dark briefs and stood enraptured as she reached up, pulling off her silk robes in one deft movement, where they joined his discarded robes. She gave him a second to admire the flat tautness of her stomach; the way her hardened nipples imprinted the thin film of her lavender-colored bra; the way her milky white breasts strained at the fabric, as if begging for his hands to free them from their confinement.

His moment over, she pushed his back down, and climbed atop his frame, her hips straddling his waist. With slow, deliberate movements, she began to grind against his straining briefs. At her ministrations, all rational thought began to melt away, replaced by lust induced euphoria. He reached up and slipped his hands under her bra, taking an alabaster globe in each hand, and began to knead. The musky smell of her arousal met his nose as she leaned her head down to his ear, and began to nibble lightly upon it.

"Where's your wand?" she whispered into his ear, unable to keep the tremors out of her voice.

He had the presence of mind to motion towards his piled robes, but was incapable of offering any further instruction. This inspired a slightly evil smile from "Belladonna", as she slid away from him, pressing every part of her moving body against his straining manhood.

All too quickly the contact ended, and she retreated from the bed. Slight clarity came with the loss, and he felt a moment of gratitude that she had still been coherent enough to cast the contraceptive charm.

He saw her rise, his wand in hand. The charm always worked best with the wizard's wand, as any pubescent teen was taught.

With a slight sense of alarm, he saw her swing the wand, until it was pointed at him.

"What the fuck is this?" he thought, still too aroused to transfer his thoughts into words.

"Imperio!"

The words hadn't even processed with his alcohol drenched faculties before the red spell struck him in the chest.

All of his alarm was wiped away, and he felt as if he were floating in an endless sea of euphoria. Distantly, through the haze, he heard a female voice begin to speak.

"My master has very precise plans for you, Mudblood scum, but I must admit, you seem to be very well equipped."

There was a short silence before the voice continued.

"Lucius needn't ever know. And besides, does he really think I don't know what he does at those gentleman's clubs?" the female voice asked rhetorically.

"Take off those odd pants, Mudblood."

And because he wanted more than anything to comply with what the female voice wanted, he did.

He certainly wasn't disappointed with the result.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Author Notes:

I hope that the resolution to last chapter's cliffhanger did not prove disappointing. If anything isn't clear, just ask me in a review, and I'll clarify it to the best of my ability.

I've was able to finish this chapter a little sooner than anticipated. I think the next one will be done by the end of the month, but I do have a progress tracker on my profile, which I update every time I write, for any interested parties.

Any comments, suggestions or criticisms would be deeply appreciated. I'll make an effort to answer every review I get.

Thanks to my co-conspirator, darklordmike, for his valuable suggestions with plotting, characterization, continuity and grammar.

Thanks to the lovely Erzibeth-Malfoy for the beta work on this chapter.

I borrowed the contraceptive charm idea from jbern's "To Fight the Coming Darkness". It's available on this site, and makes for a fine read.

DLP thanks:

Andromalius, Johnny Farrar, Insane Juggler, psihary, Amerision,
Zarent, The-Hyphenated-One, Demons in the Night

Thanks for reading.

Fourth Movement: Blessed Curse

August 9, 1990

Eleven days prior to Tonks' murder

It was a tense atmosphere that permeated the large, ornate entryway of Malfoy Manor. A driving rain battered against the large windows, its repetition interrupted by the occasional crash of thunder. An expensive Oriental carpet, adorned with intricate patterns and swirls lit up with every lightning strike, and for a moment illuminated the grasping fingers of the trees outside.

Even though their expected guest was not to arrive until eight o' clock, the two Malfoys had stood at attention since the turn of seven, dressed in their finest. Draco was currently at Junior Quidditch camp, which was convenient, as they were able to avoid exposing him to tonight's tension.

Lucius had adorned himself in his finest velvet robes, of the deepest midnight blue. His long hair had been treated recently, and not a single strand deviated from the rest.

Narcissa was immaculate in dark silk robes, her aristocratic features highlighted by lightly accented cosmetics. The dark violet robes clung to her lithe frame, accenting the generous swell of her bosom and the curves of her shapely hips.

She indeed was a sight that would have lit a fire to Lucius' libido, if not for the crushing apprehension he currently felt.

"Lucius, are you sure that it was our Lord?" Narcissa asked, breaking the long silence that had stretched between the two.

He believed he had already answered this question at least twenty times, and was unsuccessful at keeping the venom from his reply.

"Yes, I'm very sure it was him. I don't know of many other wizards who would choose to correspond by snake rather than owl. Do you, Narcissa?"

His reply drew a slight scowl from his wife, which he didn't have much of a reaction to, as his patience had already been spent on this subject.

A few days ago, a snake had entered into Lucius' study. He had moved to blast it, only to discover that it clutched an envelope within its tiny jaws. If not for the fact that it was delivered by a snake, he wouldn't have lowered himself to reading from the white muggle stationary. As it was, the Dark Lord was the only person who had ever communicated by snake.

The letter was short, and to the point. It said that the Dark Lord wished to thank his loyal servants in person, followed by a date and a time. The Dark Lord's signature concluded the letter, which only members of the Inner Circle had ever seen.

Before he could begin his explanation of this fact, the tolling of the master clock interrupted him. Eight times the clock rang, which echoed like cannon blasts in the otherwise still manor.

At the conclusion of the eighth chime, the ornately carved oak double doors were thrown wide open. The unimpeded storm raged inwards, the wind extinguishing all sources of light within the entryway. Rain surged through, and began to seep into the expensive carpet and woodwork.

Lucius cared little for this, however, as a darkened figure stood in the doorway. The dearth of light gave no impression save for a silhouette. As the shadow took a few steps into his home, he realized that the figure was far too short to be their former master, as the Dark Lord had been tall. He tensed, his hand wrapped tightly about the wand within his robe. Something was wrong.

The wind began to die down slightly, allowing for the entryway candles to re-light themselves. The newly ignited light source revealed a figure that was definitely small, adorned in a dark cloak, the hood covering the face. Slowly, it moved its hand towards the hood, in preparation of removing it.

Lucius prepared to draw his wand. The slight rustle of fabric to his side told him Narcissa was doing the same. If this intruder was not the Dark Lord, they would be dealt with harshly.

The figure slowly peeled back the hood, revealing the head of a male child. He had black hair, plastered to the sides of its head by rain, dark green eyes, and a scar in the shape of a lightning bolt on his forehead. He didn't look a day older than ten. Lucius didn't hesitate before withdrawing his wand, and leveling it at the child.

"Give me a good reason I shouldn't kill you for trespassing, little boy." Lucius spoke, his voice dripping with disdain. Was this the source of all their anticipation? If so, he found it be anti-climatic.

The boy opened his mouth, and hisses began to emanate from it. Snakes, scores of them, began to stream in through the doorway, their slithering bodies leaving trails of water behind them. Lucius felt his insides turn to ice, and he heard a small, disbelieving cry of fear from his wife. He heard rustling behind him, and turned to see snakes pouring out from other rooms as well. In short order, they were surrounded.

The floor was thick with snakes, almost looking like a single, writhing mass. All of them advanced in a rapidly closing circle, black eyes shining, forked tongues flickering. Against the approaching tide of serpents, Lucius readied his wand.

"Narcissa," Lucius whispered, "if we keep up a constant stream of banishers, we'll be fine."

She was clearly terrified, but fought through it, and nodded at his instruction. With a mere circle six feet in diameter separating the Malfoys and the snakes, Lucius pointed his wand at the snakes closest to him.

The boy began to hiss again, and the approaching snakes halted their progress. Lucius' focused his sight upon the boy, and the slight smirk etched onto his young features.

"Lower your wands. If anything should happen to me, there's not going to be anyone here to call off the snakes when they resume their advancement in one minute."

His hazel eyes focused directly upon Lucius' gray ones.

"Is that a good enough reason for you, Lucius?" the boy mocked with a cruel smile, one that looked out of place upon the youngster's face.

"Not really, boy." Lucius remarked, in a casual tone of voice. "If you thought a few snakes under a compulsion would be enough to quell me with fear, you've sadly misjudged the situation." While the ability to speak Parseltongue was impressive, a gift only Salazar Slytherin's line possessed, no one walked into his home and threatened his family.

The boy looked thoughtful for a second, before he shook his left arm free from his cloak. The candlelight flickered off a ring encircling the thumb, a gold one with a black stone set into it.

The same ring he had been forced to send to Harry Potter.

Comprehension and clarity came to Lucius immediately. It was no wonder he had been coerced into acquiring the ring, and sending it.

He dropped to one knee, roughly pulling Narcissa down with him.

"My lord, we beg for your forgiveness. We had no idea you had taken another form."

Silence greeted his begs, which stretched out into what by measured time is twenty seconds, but seemed like lifetimes to Lucius. Head down, he almost collapsed with relief when the hisses began again, prompting the snakes to withdraw and disperse.

"Lucius, Narcissa," the voice began, "rise, my faithful servants."

He rose slowly, his wife right behind him. Once they had both regained their feet, his gaze stole once again to their Master.

"Your mistakes tonight were understandable, even expected in a situation such as this. Beyond that, I owe you a debt of gratitude, Lucius, for sending out the ring."

Lucius bowed his head in response.

"Thank you, my Lord. Would you be willing to indulge and inform us how the ring was able to bring you back?" Lucius asked in a

reverent tone. Curiosity gnawed at him, as he could conceive few scenarios in which an enchanted object would return someone from death.

The Dark Lord's stare grew hard for a moment, and Lucius grew uncomfortable, wondering if he had overstepped his bounds.

"I will indulge you this time, Lucius; for all that you have done for me. Only my most faithful of servants would have disabled the potent protections upon the ring, and sent it to the child of one of my former enemies, all of their own volition."

Lucius bowed again, stoic demeanor held strong, but his mind was a whirlwind of thought. Did this Voldemort even know about the Unbreakable Vow he had been forced into? Was this truly even the same master they had served over a decade ago?

"Despite my vast power during the Wizarding War, all those years ago, I was aware that there was a chance that I may be defeated. However unlikely it may have been, a prudent individual always provides for any scenario, no matter its probability. It was then, in the later years of the war that I called upon the most obscure of all magic. I was able to successfully copy my memories, and place them in the ring. I also sacrificed a small measure of my power, so that the ring would have the ability to consume the consciousness and magical core of a prospective host, which would effectively assure my resurrection."

Lucius felt it made some sort of sense, but still had his reservations. He felt the Dark Lord was being intentionally vague about the process. An inanimate object had no active magic, so shouldn't have been able to perform the magical feats described. With more important matters at hand, he saved the internal debate for later.

It was Narcissa who spoke next.

"Thank you, my Lord, for indulging our questions. So does that mean you have successfully killed the Potter heir?" Narcissa asked in a low tone.

"At the moment I merely wear the boy like a skin. While I obviously could crack the boy's mind and consume his magical core,

destroying him would conflict with my current goal, as I still need this body for a little while longer."

Lucius was silent for a moment, before asking the question prompted.

"My lord, is there any way that we may assist in this goal?"

"Yes, there is. In fact, your assistance will be vital to its success. Tell me, Lucius, what is the modern structure of the Ministry?"

"My Lord, the public dismay and uncertainty that followed Halloween night of 1981, the date of your assumed downfall, created a clamor for the government to make them feel safe and protected. The Ministry took this as an opportunity to create many new departments, many of them of little use, but it appeased the public, as it created the perception that the Ministry was actively making the Wizarding World safe."

Lucius paused for a moment, before continuing.

"As you've no doubt deduced, the Ministry's true intention was the vast expansion of government. With an almost unlimited supply of Ministry jobs to hand out to loyal supporters, politicians had the power to employ countless people to work on their political campaigns, with the promise of an easy job in the Ministry an effective motivator. In the past decade, an incumbent has never lost an election."

The Dark Lord let out a cold laugh at this revelation, which both Malfoys smiled at.

"I have a great deal of influence in almost every Ministry department, but none more so than the newly created Muggle Relations Department. It is comprised solely of political appointees, which given the corrupt nature of hacks, makes them very easy to manipulate to my advantage. There is nothing I could not accomplish within that department. The best part is, though, my Lord, that most of the members of the department share our opinions on Mudbloods and blood supremacy."

His master let out another cold laugh at this fact.

"Very good, Lucius. Tell me, does the Department of Muggleborn Education still exist?"

"Yes, but now they're a branch of the DMLE. The DMLE now has a nation-wide magical monitoring grid that detects all magical discharges. All detected instances of accidental magic are noted, and the reports are sent to the Muggleborn Education office, which then sends out its own agents to investigate. They identify the exact magic user, and put their names down for Hogwarts."

The Dark Lord nodded at this explanation.

"What would it take to falsify a report of accidental magic, and have it promoted to priority status for Muggleborn Education?"

"It wouldn't be easy, my Lord, but I have enough influence to accomplish it."

The Dark Lord waved his hand impatiently.

"Make sure that it happens, then. The address is the Stockwell Orphanage, in the center of London. Make certain the investigating agent is the most inexperienced, incompetent one in the employ of the agency."

"Of course, my Lord." Lucius said, head bowed slightly.

"I assume, Lucius, that as soon as the DMLE created their magical detection array, you had your home appropriately warded against this level of intrusion?"

Lucius nodded in response.

"In that case, I want you to get back in contact with the black market curse-breakers who did the work here. I'm looking for the same type of cloaking from the Ministry's net, but it only needs to be for a small room, and something I can activate with by a mere tap of the wand. I can't activate it by using magic, since the Ministry detectors will pick it up. I'll also need an extensive supply of potions, rune carving stones, tools, and two spare wands. I don't have the exact list of potions and stones needed yet, but I want you to start sending an owl to me once every two days, so I can update you consistently on what I need."

"Of course, my Lord." Lucius replied.

Without acknowledging Lucius further, the Dark Lord turned to Narcissa.

"Narcissa, I require your participation as well, for I have three tasks that need completion."

Narcissa bowed low in response.

"Whatever you need, my Lord, I am at your disposal."

He nodded, pleased with her reaction.

"Whomever Muggleborn Education sends, I am going to kill them, and take their hair. You will assume their identity, and contact Dumbledore. When he grants you an audience, you shall speak of a moral dilemma, where you have discovered Harry Potter, but the director of Muggleborn Education wishes to keep this fact secret. In good conscience, you will seek his advice on the matter. He'll thank you, and immediately rush off to meet Harry Potter, to save him from whatever fate has befallen him. He'll be expecting to play the part of liberator, and will be completely unprepared for what I have planned for him."

Both Malfoys were silent at Voldemort's implied course of action, temporarily struck speechless. Even at the height of his power, the Dark Lord never sought a fight with Dumbledore. Now, with the magical core of a child, he's going to take on the most powerful current living Light wizard in Europe? Lucius wondered to himself if his former master had gone completely insane.

As the silence stretched further, the Dark Lord's gaze grew inquisitive. While the expression should have been at home on the face of a young man, it filled Lucius with unease, yet he was unable to think of an adequate way to break the silence.

It was Narcissa that saved them from the continuation of the awkward silence.

"My Lord, what else do you require of me?" she asked.

"I want you to assume the identity of the Muggleborn Education employee, as they'll have access to some of the deeper parts of the DMLE. We'll need a sacrificial lamb, someone to take the fall so that you can infiltrate the DMLE artifact storage without destroying your own cover. I want the artifact directly following Dumbledore's death."

Narcissa looked to Lucius for help, but he had none to offer. He had a good idea what the Dark Lord was after, but didn't want to steal his thunder.

"My Lord, which artifact do you desire?"

"My wand, Narcissa." the Dark Lord replied.

After the night of the Dark Lord's downfall, it had been the Aurors who had been the first to officially arrive at the scene. There had not been many remnants of Godric's Hollow, but one of the few artifacts that had survived was Voldemort's wand. After careful examination by the Unspeakables, it had been sent to the DMLE's artifact storage. The amount of deadly artifacts contained within the warehouse was almost without number, and kept under stringent security. Referring to it as a difficult place to infiltrate was an understatement.

"The third task, my Lord?" Narcissa asked, her voice trembling slightly.

The Dark Lord turned to Lucius, and regarded him.

"Lucius, in a face of a major crisis, who would be the one person in the Ministry that could potentially pull things together, and keep the Ministry functioning?"

He presented the pretext of thinking for a moment, but in reality, there really was only one person who could fill that role.

"Without question, Amelia Bones. Despite her unwillingness to play the political games with other departments, she made quite the name for herself during the first Wizarding war, so she has a great deal of support within the Wizengamot. Also, all that work under her are fiercely loyal, including the Aurors, which are probably the most stable department within the Ministry."

"Very well." Voldemort said, before turning back to Narcissa.

"Narcissa, you will use your assumed role to gradually move up in the DMLE, get closer to Bones, and eliminate her."

He saw his wife's eyes widen in fear. While competent with a wand, she wasn't any match for the combat-hardened head of the DMLE.

The Dark Lord let out a laugh at her apparent fear.

"I don't require that you perform the actual murder. Hire an assassin, and let him use your credentials to gain access. Send her a cursed artifact. I just need her dead. With her gone, coupled with the public fear of my own return, the Ministry will be unable to properly organize, and defend against insurrection."

Lucius' face betrayed nothing, but his earlier inhibitions had grown in strength. Really, what was his Master thinking? A low-level Ministry worker in a small office would not have access to Bones, since she only dealt with the Aurors directly, on a regular basis.

"It shall be done, my master." Narcissa replied, with head lowered.

"See that it does," Voldemort said, before training his gaze upon Lucius.

"Draw back your sleeve, Lucius."

Lucius complied, exposing his pale forearm, upon which the Dark Mark was branded, and presented his wand. The Dark Lord took it from him, and appraised it for a moment, before bringing the tip down, pressing it into the Dark Mark.

It was never pleasant acting as the conduit for the Dark Lord's messages, but Lucius noticed the pain was not nearly as potent as usual.

As the seconds passed, Lucius thought of all the Death Eaters across the country, who had just received the Dark Lord's message. There would be no way to hide from it now, those who had hidden, had renounced the Dark Lord, even those rotting in Azkaban right now.

The Dark Lord had returned.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

August 31, 1990

At precisely 8 o'clock in the evening, the main fireplace within the Flamel estate came alive with green flames. A swirling Albus Dumbledore appeared within the flames, and gracefully stepped out of the Floo connection point. With hardly a hair out of place, he stood upon the hearth, a warm smile upon his face as he beheld his approaching friends.

"Albus, it has been too long," greeted Nicolas, "I was beginning to think you'd forgotten about us."

He grasped Nicolas' outstretched hand, and gave it a firm, friendly shake, as his friend's eyes danced with mischief.

The Elixir of Life had been kind to not only his lifespan, but also to his outward appearance. Despite being more than halfway through his sixth century of life, he looked younger than Dumbledore. Short-cropped white hair topped a ruddy complexion, only lightly touched by wrinkles.

"As much as it pains me to say, I must say that you are a rather forgettable person. However, how could I ever forget the stunning mix of intellect, beauty and grace that is your wife?"

Perenelle, the woman in question, stepped forward, a fond smile upon her face. Time had been even kinder to her than Nicolas. While her hair was grey, it still grew thick, in long locks that fell down to the middle of her back. Her tall form was still striking; the only lines on her face the ones that formed at the corners of her striking blue eyes while smiling.

She embraced him with a warm hug, which he returned, along with a chaste kiss to her smooth cheek.

"It's good to see you again, Albus." Perenelle said, the weight of her chin upon his shoulder.

"It's an absolute pleasure to once again be in your presence, milady." Dumbledore complimented. She let go of him with a smile upon her face, and motioned to the couch positioned near the fireplace.

"Please, have a seat."

"Thank you," he replied, taking a seat upon the plush, cream-colored couch. Perenelle took a seat next to him, while Nicolas sat himself in the adjacent chair.

"So, Albus," Nicolas began, "how goes the battle at Hogwarts?"

"It's a difficult battle, I must say. Would you believe that the Board of Governors attempted to coerce me into hiring Gilderoy Lockhart as the next Defense Against the Dark Arts professor?"

Nicolas broke into hearty guffaws, while his wife adopted a stunned look.

"Albus, are you serious? That man is a fraud of the highest order."

"I couldn't agree more. I assure you, I was quite vigilant in maintaining that he would never set foot within our proud institution as a professor."

Nicolas let out a slightly malicious grin at Dumbledore's statement.

"Oh, I don't know about that, Dumbledore. With the recent history of defense instructors, I would think it an excellent opportunity to get rid of that glory-seeking wanker."

He smiled at his friend's idea, while Perenelle looked less than pleased at her husband's blunt assessment.

"Luckily, I was able to get a good contingent of the governors on my side, and they agreed that Theobald Thistlewood would make for a far superior teacher to Mr. Lockhart."

"Can't say I've ever heard the name," Perenelle said, "who is he?"

"He's a former Auror, who once retired, found that the life of relaxation he had always dreamed about was a bit too boring for his

tastes. We've had a relative scarcity of qualified applicants, so I was pleased when he inquired about the availability of the post. I believe he'll make a fine addition to the staff."

"Yes, he'll have a fine year, until a swarm of knarls enter into Hogwarts, and carry him away," Nicolas spoke, earning him a sharp look from his wife, and a small chuckle from Dumbledore.

"Theobald is quite aware of the apparent stigma upon the position. He wasn't very concerned, saying it provided a convenient escape clause should teaching turn out not to be his cup of tea."

Both Flamel's smiled at Theobald's lack of concern about the unfortunate fates that had befallen recent Defense professors.

"Besides the constant struggle with the Board of Governors, how are the things at Hogwarts going?" Perenelle asked.

Dumbledore felt a moment of gratitude for giving him the option to decline talking about the Board of Governors. The board had only been a minor nuisance during Nicolas' short tenure as Headmaster of Hogwarts, and he had been appalled at the level of meddling that Dumbledore had to contend with on a daily basis.

"We should be ready for tomorrow's re-opening of Hogwarts for the school year, barring anything unforeseen. Perenelle, how's the greenhouse?"

Perenelle smiled at the question, sensing Dumbledore's desire to change the subject.

"I've been attempting to cross-breed species of plants. I came into possession of a rather rare cut of a South American vine, which appears to have similar healing properties to healing charms. They don't do well outside of the rain forest, so I've been attempting to cross it with a plant indigenous to England."

Dumbledore didn't need to feign being impressed at her work.

"That would be quite the breakthrough. May I ask what inspired it?"

"You certainly may," Perenelle replied, "I had read an account of a senior Auror who had participated in a battle against Grindelwald.

The name eludes me, but he spoke of the horror of being the only wizard who had made it through physically unharmed and the wails of the others who weren't as fortunate. He couldn't do anything to alleviate their suffering, as he had magical exhaustion. No healing charms, no numbing charms, nothing."

Dumbledore nodded in understanding. He was all too familiar with the horrors of war.

"It occurred to me that it could save a great deal of lives if there was a way to heal people without having to use magic. One of my contacts, a French herbologist, mentioned a rare vine that grew in the South American rain forests. It wasn't easy, but I was able to acquire a sample."

From deep within his thoughts, he saw his mentor and wife exchange a look almost telepathic in nature, a knowing forged from decades upon decades of familiarity. He saw Nicolas' face lose some of its good cheer, and regarded him with an earnest look.

"Albus, you were rather elusive about the true nature of your visit here. We very much enjoy your company, but you must have had a very compelling reason to visit us so close to the start of the school year. So, what's going on?"

He sighed deeply. What he was about to do did not promise to be easy, but had to be done. He conjured a white cloth, and laid it upon the table. With the curious eyes of the Flamel's upon him, he withdrew a small, rough wooden box from his robes. Gently, he opened the box, and levitated its contents onto the cloth.

The hosts appraised the odd combination of objects, Perenelle with slight disgust, Nicolas with a blank look, which looked wholly out of place on the alchemist's face.

Upon the white linen lay a fair amount of dark ashes, what looked suspiciously like a charred fingernail, and a gold ring set with a black stone, apparently untouched by the fire which begat the ashes.

Nicolas slowly reached out to pick up the ring, but Dumbledore gently stopped his hand.

"This ring is extremely dangerous. I cannot stress how important it is that neither of you touch it, under any circumstances."

His friend nodded, before bringing his hand back to his lap. In the wake of his warning, it was Perenelle who spoke first.

"Albus, you must have had a good reason for bringing this dangerous item into our home. What's the significance of the ring?"

With a deep sigh, he began his story.

"A few days ago, I was contacted by a former student, who worked as an intern for the Department of Muggleborn Education. She told me that she had found Harry Potter at a muggle orphanage, in the center of London."

Nicolas merely looked surprised, while Perenelle let out a gasp of surprise.

"Is it true? Is Harry Potter really alive?"

Dumbledore nodded in response, but his face remained grave. Her excitement faded quickly at his lack of excitement.

"It wasn't a happy occurrence, was it?" she asked, in crestfallen tone.

He shook his head, before continuing with the story.

"I naturally endeavored to confirm this astonishing fact. It was, but I was shaken by his remarkable likeness to the young Tom Riddle I had met decades ago, and far more disturbed when the child spoke using the same words I exchanged with Tom Riddle during our first encounter. He tried, unsuccessfully, to defeat me using runic attacks."

In front of the shocked faces of the Flamel's, his voice faltered slightly.

"I...I had to hurt him to subdue him. He was possessed by a fragment of Voldemort's soul, but Harry gained control long enough to help me. Before I could banish Voldemort from his body, he attacked Harry's mind, and severely damaged it."

The pain in his eyes evident, Perenelle grasped his hand, and gave it a squeeze of reassurance. He gave her a grateful smile, before finishing his tale.

"He's currently at a secret ward within St. Mungo's. While his physical wounds have almost completely healed, it is the mental ones that concern the Healers. We believe he'll make a full psychological recovery, but it is going to be a long healing process."

The Flamel's had been understandably horrified by the details of Harry's possession, but appeared slightly mollified knowing Harry would most likely recover.

"How did Harry find his way to the orphanage?" Perenelle asked, breaking the brief silence.

"I'm not sure," Dumbledore replied, "it's one of the many mysteries that surround Harry Potter. All I know is that he was found in a near-catatonic state, wandering the desolate back roads of Bedfordshire County. While his clothes were scorched, he was without any physical injury. There were no reported fires that week within a fifty mile radius. As implausible as it may seem, it's as if young Harry literally appeared from nowhere."

While giving Perenelle his explanation, he couldn't help but notice that Nicolas had only been listening with half an ear, his attention more focused upon the ring. He supposed his mentor had already begun to assemble the pieces.

"Albus, do you have any idea how Harry came into possession of the ring?"

He shook his head slowly.

"Do you know what the ring is?"

Dumbledore paused a second to compose his reply.

"I can't say with exact certainty, but I have a hypothesis. I know that it inexplicably contains active magic, can possess people, and carries a curse upon it. Based upon that information, what would be your opinion?"

Nicolas closed his eyes in concentration. After about thirty seconds, he seemed to deflate slightly.

"Shite," Nicolas whispered to himself more than anyone else, "that poor child."

Perenelle was visibly puzzled by her husband's reaction, but said nothing, as he was clearly about to speak.

"Albus, is the ring Voldemort's Horcrux?"

He gave a single nod in response.

"You had always claimed that Voldemort would be back, despite the evidence to the contrary at Godric's Hollow. You knew he had a Horcrux, didn't you?"

"You're only partially correct," Dumbledore started, "I always had good reason to believe he made a Horcrux, but had no concrete proof until the discovery of Harry Potter."

Nicolas was silent for a moment, a look of deep contemplation upon his face. With a heavy exhale, he regarded Dumbledore with a look of weariness.

"I assume you want help destroying the Horcrux." Nicolas said, his voice steeped with trepidation.

Dumbledore nodded his head.

"My own knowledge of Horcruxes is rather limited. While basilisk venom is reputed to destroy them, one hasn't been seen for hundreds of years, so that avenue is closed to us. I also have no intention of using the Dark Arts to rid ourselves of it. Nicolas, you're one of the finest Potion Masters that has ever lived. If anyone could somehow re-create the effects of basilisk venom with Potions, it would be you."

Nicolas had no visible reaction to his praises, but continued his emotionless appraisal of Dumbledore. Undeterred, he pushed on.

"Nicolas, we may have found the key to defeating Voldemort for good. His soul was bound to earth by his Horcrux, which allows for

the possibility that the foul magic of his fractured soul has since found a new host. If we can destroy the Horcrux, then the next time Voldemort surfaces, he'll be without his trump card. We could finally defeat him."

His mentor looked ready to reply, but his wife cut him off.

"Of course he'll do it, Albus," Perenelle exclaimed, whirling upon her husband, withering gaze unsheathed.

"I'm well aware that you tire of the Wizarding World in general, and all of its pointless squabbles, but I will certainly not allow you to sit back when you have the power to help thwart one of the most vile Dark Lords that has ever lived."

Silence met her chastisement. As it stretched out, Dumbledore struggled to keep the corners of his mouth down after Perenelle's verbal lambasting, while the married couple exchanged cross expressions.

Nicolas finally broke his gaze from his wife's, and looked down on Dumbledore with a glance of annoyance.

"You, Albus, do you really think I don't know you're trying to hide a smile right now?"

At his companion's cranky outburst, Dumbledore broke into chuckles. It proved contagious, as Nicolas' feigned anger dissolved into a smile, which he refocused upon his wife.

"Forgive me, Perenelle, you're completely right. This is one situation that would be far too selfish of me to ignore."

He turned to Dumbledore.

"I would be honored to help you in this matter."

"Thank you, Nicolas."

He then turned to Perenelle.

"And thank you, Perenelle, for your support."

She smiled at his thanks.

"You're very welcome, Albus. Is there anything else we can do for you?"

Dumbledore adopted a slightly melancholy look at Perenelle's question.

"There is one other issue I need help with, which has equal importance to the destruction of the Horcrux. Harry will be physically healed soon, but will need a quiet place to recuperate, outside of the clamors of the Wizarding World. If the Ministry were to get a hold of him, they would have no qualms against using him as a puppet to further their own agendas. Would you two be willing to consent to watch over Harry while he recovers his strength?"

Perenelle opened her mouth to reply, but her husband was quicker.

"While I may be sick of the squabbles of Wizarding Society, and the Ministry's bureaucracy and inefficiency, Harry Potter never asked for any of this. I would be more than glad to help the young boy to the best of my ability, and I'm sure my wife would be just as, if not more so willing than I."

Nicolas turned to his head to his right, just in time to catch his wife's bright smile, and nodded conformation.

Albus let out a large, warm smile at the decision of the Flamel's.

"Thank you very much. I can't imagine a better place, or better people to care for him during his recovery. By the time he's eligible for Hogwarts next year, I'm sure he'll be in fine shape."

He turned to the side to hug Perenelle, and then gave his mentor a warm, hearty handshake.

While Harry Potter may have a long road ahead of him, for the first time since their fateful meeting at the orphanage, Dumbledore began to get the feeling that perhaps things would work out for Harry after all.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

The scorched sky is an endless ocean of rolling, black clouds, with the occasional pocket of dull yellow shining through. Burning physical agony courses through my being, the same as it had for as long as memory allowed. For all I know, the pain actually is now a part of me.

I try to concentrate upon the mysterious rays of bright yellow color that splash through the sky. It seems like I should know what the source was, but I just can't recall it. All I receive in return for my efforts to concentrate is a large increase in my agony, which once again scatters all near-coherent thoughts to the four winds.

Was it a great yellow fire that lay beyond the smog, which was slowly consuming the world whole?

I think I may have had a name at some point, but can't really be sure. Things have been the same for so long, it may not even matter either way.

The dark, sooty patterns of the sky did seem a little unnatural. Maybe the black wastelands of smoke are a relatively new occurrence here. Isn't the sky typically green?

While the patterns in the sky seemed to change, I never did. I'm not truly sure if I even have a body, or any form at all. Maybe at one time, but it was stolen, and replaced by a conscious pain. Unmoving, I'll just lay here forever.

All of my attempts to discover who I am have been futile. Perhaps it has always been like this, and I was just flung here upon the creation of the world. It occurs to me that I might just be a rock, no different than the countless others that dot the landscape. Maybe all rocks feel pain, but no one can hear their screams?

After another eternity, something new began to happen. It first comes into my awareness subtly, a change without detectable effect, but I then begin to feel different. A moment later, I realized that it was a sound. Aside from the crackling of flames, and the desolate rush of the wind, I can't recall ever hearing any other sounds.

This new, wonderful thing, however, is a change. It seems to come from nowhere, but exists everywhere, lifting my spirits from the abyss of agony.

It's a voice! Increasing in volume, I feel it in every fiber in my being, of my body. Of course, I have a body!

The volume increases in potency, and I realize that it's a song. It's so beautiful that it takes every effort of my being to not break down and weep at the wonder of it all. Enraptured, the constant pain begins to fade. Like a retreating tide revealing seaweed-covered rocks, my thoughts begin to clarify, to make sense.

This place hadn't always been a fiery cataclysm. Once it teemed with the warm pulse of life, with lush greenery as far as the eye could see, all beneath the serenity of a light blue sky.

The song again grows even louder, and the blossoms of hope, once buried so deeply as to never be found, flowers forth.

With a stirring in the deepest parts of my soul, I remember. I am ten years old, and I am a wizard. My name is Harry Potter

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

August 28, 1990

At half-past-six in the morning, Octavius stepped out of one of the many Floo-connected fireplaces that lined the walls of the Atrium. With a light spring to his step, his boots clacking lightly upon the dark, polished wood, he approached the end of the Atrium. He stopped right at the security stand, which stood vigil to the twin set of golden gates, whistling.

Indeed, he felt as though he had all the reason in the world to smile, for he was doing her will. Just the mere thought of her, and serving her will, brought with it another bout of euphoria.

His cheerful whistles brought forth the security guard, Eric Munch. Judging by the wrinkled blue robes and the bloodshot eyes of the man, he deduced that the security guard didn't share his own bliss.

"Good morning, Mr. Munch." Octavius greeted, in a tone that couldn't have been more jovial.

"Your name, sir?" Munch demanded in a bored voice.

"That would be Octavius Pepper, sir; here for my meeting with the Commerce sub-committee," he beamed, before finishing, "I have a few things to go over before the actual meeting."

He couldn't help but notice that poor Munch's mood only seemed to sour further with each passing moment. He briefly considered referring to him as Munchy to lighten the man's obviously troubled mind, but ultimately decided that might do more harm than good.

"Sure, whatever you say. Your wand, please."

He produced it with a needlessly complicated flourish, almost dropping it in the process before pressing it into the hand of the poorly shaved guard.

"Here it is, sir. Nine inches of maple, with a feather from a griffin for the core. Did you know that historians think that Rowena Ravenclaw's wand had a griffin feather for a core?"

Oddly enough, he observed that Munch didn't exactly seem blown away by this fascinating piece of historical lore, if the contracting of his eyebrows were any indication.

The beleaguered guard rushed his way through the wand-check process. He thrust the slip roughly into Octavius' hand, before turning his back to him and trudging back into the security stand.

He waved at the retreating guard, and wished him a good day. His only response was the slam of a door as Munch shut himself inside the security stand. He thought he might have heard a mumble of "too fucking early for these idiots", but he might have mistaken. Surely it wasn't him the grumpy guard referred to?

With a shrug, he passed through the golden gates, and approached the array of lifts. He moved over to the farthest one from the door, and entered. He had been told that security only checked if a visitor was cleared to enter the Ministry, not whether they went to their intended destination. According to security's morning manifest, he was scheduled to attend a Commerce sub-committee hearing at quarter-past-eight.

With a slight hint of glee, he punched the button for level 2 of the Ministry, the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. He had no intention of showing up for the hearing, as his mistress had other plans for him, which was far more important than any mundane meetings.

After a few moments, the elevator doors opened, and a cool, pleasant female voice welcomed him to level 2 of the Ministry of Magic. Upon exiting the elevator, he took a right, in the opposite direction of the Auror Headquarters. His mistress had explained to him that he was to enter the fourth door on his right, which proved to be a heavy, oak double door, which led to the DMLE's artifact storage.

With a quick look around, to assure that no one watched his passage, he found the coast clear. Swiftly, he opened the door and stepped in, closing it softly behind him. Beyond was a wide hallway with white walls, almost completely bereft of decoration. The only objects that broke up the monotony of the white walls were various signs with claims of access restricted only authorized personnel, and a two small insets into the wall, placed twenty feet apart.

The corridor was empty, so he positioned himself near the insets, and waited.

His mistress had told him earlier that the security system for the storage was simple, but effective. Those with authorized access had their wands registered, and a simple tap of their wand upon the elaborately carved stone nestled into the hallway's insets would allow access.

If someone chose to not tap the checkpoint stone, or used an unregistered wand, unbreakable magical barriers cascaded from the ceiling, blocking in the offending party. He wasn't sure how they were going to gain access, but was certain his mistress had a plan.

After only a few minutes of waiting, the double doors opened again. He tensed, before a young woman passed through the entryway. She had bright pink hair, and a cute, heart-shaped face, the exact description of the woman he was supposed to take further orders from. She was followed by a tall behemoth of a man that bore more than a passing resemblance to a troll.

The woman favored him with a hungry look, while the man just looked rather annoyed with him. As he approached closer, Octavius realized this was none other than William Flint, the areshole who proposed to shut down his livelihood!

Anger began to cloud his vision, and he looked around with a start, wondering why the hell he was there. While attempting to answer this question, the fog that had descended upon his mind clamped down again, and things began to make sense again. If his mistress wanted to work with William, then he couldn't be that bad of a guy.

"Are you sure the Imperious is going to hold?" asked Flint.

"Of course," the woman replied, "He just had a momentary lapse upon seeing you. I suppose he's not too fond of your right now."

Flint sneered at her reply.

"The feeling is completely fucking mutual. Let the Mudblood know that he better not fuck this up, Tonks."

"Don't worry about it," the woman, Tonks, assured, "he's not going to do anything I don't tell him to."

He gave a curt nod at her reassurance, and withdrew his wand, and handed it to the woman. She took the wand and handed it to Octavius. As she did, his mistress' voice spoke again in his head.

"Flint has agreed to serve our purposes. Hit him with a disarming curse."

Octavius found this odd considering he already had William's wand, but he complied. The disarmer hit him in the arm, knocking him back slightly.

"Good work, Octavius. Now, hit him with a slicing curse, directly in the stomach. It has to look bad enough to clear him of culpability, but can't hurt him permanently."

He found this to be a wonderful idea, as all of his mistress' order were, and readied his wand.

"I don't know if Lucius is paying me enough for this bullshit." William muttered under his breath.

With a quick incantation, the red spell flew through the air. Sadly, his mistress never asked him how good his aim was.

The spell flew low, and struck William's groin area in a glut of blood. Almost as if in slow motion, he sank to the ground, his face frozen, almost uncomprehending.

He looked to his right, to see the Tonks rubbing her temples. He noted that she seemed rather perturbed about something, but wasn't sure what was bothering her.

With an angry flick of her wand, she cast a silencing spell on William, who lay on the floor curled up in a fetal position, cupping his ruined genitalia. The voice of his mistress spoke again, in an angry tone.

"You fucking Mudblood retard! How the fuck do you miss? It was only fifteen feet!"

Octavius found himself agreeing with his mistress, as her word was absolute law. Of course he was a Mudblood retard!

With an obvious note of exasperation, her voice spoke again.

"Well, this is great. William is a vindictive bastard, and he's never going to forget this. Just hit him with a blasting curse. Point blank this time."

He looked his right, and saw the woman hit William with a silencing spell. She then appraised him with a look, as if asking him what he was waiting for.

"What indeed?" he wondered to himself.

He advanced on William, wand drawn. William must have seen something in his face he didn't like, since he began to crabwalk backward, leaving a crimson streak on the ground as he moved. William began to plead silently as he reached the downed man, his mouth working as if there was any way he wasn't going to carry out his mistress' will.

Heedless to William's arms grabbing at him, trying to make him stop, he pressed his wand to the man's forehead, and cast the blasting curse. William's head exploded like a piñata, spraying him with blood, brains and bone fragments. His body jerked one final time, before the limbs froze; the only movement was the slackening flow of blood from his throat.

Idly, Octavius noted that his robes were probably ruined.

He turned around, to see the woman press her wand to the keystone. There was no visible effect, but when she passed through the ward zone, no magical barriers spring into existence. Without a look back, she opened the door at the other end of the hallway and entered, closing it behind her.

He was at an impasse. Was he supposed to follow Tonks? She hadn't instructed him to do so.

"Yes, Octavius, I want you to follow my example, using Flint's wand. When you get in, hit the young man inside with a stunner. Try not to miss."

As his mistress ordered, he did. He passed through the ward without incident, and opened the door.

Beyond the door lay a small room, with a long counter taking up half of the opposite wall. Both Tonks and a young, blond man were leaning against the counter, talking. At the sound of the door opening, he began to speak, slowly turning to the door.

"Good morning, Mr. Flin....."

His sentence was cut-off when he saw Octavius. He only had a moment to register a brief surprise before Octavius' stunner caught him in the leg. The blond man flopped ungracefully to the floor, his jaw hitting the tiled floor with a loud crack.

Tonks started to move swiftly once the young man was knocked out, grabbing two chairs from the side of the room, and moving them into the center. She positioned them six feet apart, facing one another.

"Drag him into the chair, and bind him," Tonks ordered, "then bind me in the opposite chair. You know what to do from there."

Indeed he did, as his mistress had already went over this part with him.

He bound both of them with the incarcerous spell, before pointing his wand at the trussed man.

"Remember," Tonks warned, "be careful with Siegfried. If he dies, we won't find the location of the wand."

Octavius nodded, before waking up Siegfried with a whisper of "enervate".

Young Siegfried began to scream as soon as the spell took effect, which prompted Octavius to hit him with a silencing spell. He continued his silent tirade for a few moments before giving up, and observing his captor. His eyes adopted a look of terror upon seeing the blood and brains splashed across Octavius' robes.

"What are you waiting for? Our time is short, begin the questioning!"

With a smile, he looked at the terror-stricken young man, reveling in performing his mistress' work. Oddly enough, young Siegfried didn't look reassured by his winning smile.

"This is going to be simple, Siegfried. You give me what I want; I'll leave both yourself and Tonks alone. If you refuse to answer my questions, or answer incorrectly, I not only hurt you, but I hurt your pretty friend here."

He moved closer to the visibly shaking man, and rubbed his hand through the congealing blood upon his robes. With Siegfried's frenzies gasps of fear growing louder, he smeared William's blood over the young man's face. It didn't suit his face well, but he wasn't about to argue with his mistress' orders.

"William Flint didn't answer my questions in a satisfactory manner. It, well, didn't work out too well for him. You don't want the same thing to happen to Tonks and yourself, right Siegfried?"

The front of Siegfried's robes turned a darker shade at his statement, followed by the sharp smell of urine assaulting his nostrils. He

turned to the side, to see Tonks ignoring the stench, and keep her ruse of being terrified up.

"Siegfried, I don't want that to happen to you, though. Why don't you tell me where artifact 38723 is located?"

The bound man's eyes widened at his request. Apparently the young man knew exactly what the item was. After a moment's indecision, he shook his head sharply from side-to-side, sending off flecks of blood and sweat.

"I'm sorry to hear that, Siegfried."

He turned on Tonks, and regarded her for a moment.

"Do it, just as we planned."

At the voice's push, he whipped a bludgeoner at the young woman. It hit her in the stomach, pushing the air out of her lungs, causing her to gasp for air. He whirled back to Siegfried.

"Tell me, where's the artifact?"

He replied with another shake of his head, almost completely identical to the first.

"Threats to other people aren't getting to him. He's not going to break until you hurt him. You know what to do."

Octavius agreed, he certainly did know what to do. He steadily advanced on the young man, wand drawn. At Siegfried watched on in silent terror, he stuck his wand inside Siegfried's mouth, and pressed it against the inside of his right cheek. With a look of sheer terror in the young man's eyes, he cast a cutting curse.

The curse ripped through his cheek like it was tissue paper, and exited in a splash of blood. Siegfried began to scream silently again, his bloodstained teeth visible through the rent in his face.

"I'm going to do far worse if you won't answer my question. Where's the artifact?"

With a frightened resignation, the young man emphatically nodded his head. Octavius canceled the silencing charm at the sign of cooperation.

"Please don't kill me!" Siegfried begged, the hole in his face distorting the words slightly, "I'll tell you where it is, I swear!"

"Where is it?"

"It's at the top of shelf twenty, on the very back wall of the warehouse. It's on the top shelf."

Octavius nodded in satisfaction.

"Just stun him, Octavius. We need his memories intact."

He complied, and stunned the young man yet again. He then freed Tonks, who immediately jumped up, running to one of the lockers that lined the wall. A quick unlocking charm later, the locker opened up, revealing two brooms. She withdrew both of them, throwing one of them over to him. She mounted the remaining one, and took off into the stacks.

"Go help the woman, time is short."

With the command given, he kicked off from the ground, and followed the pink-haired girl.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Despite the fact that it had been almost thirty-six hours since her last moment of sleep, Amelia Bones paced her office relentlessly. She was well aware that she was going to be late for the Wizarding Commerce sub-committee meeting, but couldn't find it in her heart to care.

In the new Ministry that had risen over the past ten years, even trivial matters such as a Muggleborn's right to conduct business with their own world, was put under scrutiny. Often during the seemingly endless sub-committee meetings, it took all her effort to keep back the bile that rose in her throat. Her position forced her to preside over these pointless exercises in bureaucracy, to pretend to care, as if they weren't complete and utter bullshit.

Besides, her current cause of anticipation was of far greater importance. She had Floo-called Kingsley Shacklebolt, her most trusted Auror, very early in the morning and roused him from his slumber. She had apologized for the intrusion, but Kingsley waved her off, knowing it had to be important to call at the late hour. She explained how she needed him to wait at the security gate within the Atrium, and apprehend the director of Muggleborn Education, Charlotte Lewis. Preferably in a non-violent manner, and bring her to Amelia's office.

Amelia had only two leads that might have had culpability in yesterday's fiasco, and since she had a good idea of Charlotte's schedule, thought it would probably be easier to find her.

At five-to-eight in the morning, a sharp knock stopped her mid-step.

"Come in." Amelia beckoned.

Charlotte walked through the door, flanked by Kingsley. The bald-headed Auror caught her eyes, and she replied with an almost imperceptible shake of her head. Kingsley nodded, and backed back into the hallway, closing the door.

"Thank you for coming to see me," Amelia welcomed, "I hope Kingsley didn't startle you."

Judging by the look of trepidation upon her face, he had. While Kingsley would have been polite, it would be completely understandable to be nervous when summoned to the office of the DMLE director.

"No, he reassured me that I wasn't in trouble," Charlotte spoke, "but I can't help but feel intimidated when a senior Auror escorts me to your office. What's going on?"

"Charlotte, what do you know about yesterday's situation at the Stockwell muggle orphanage?"

She let out a rueful smile at the question.

"Not much. When something important happens, my department usually finds out slightly ahead of the Daily Prophet readership."

"Are there currently any young muggleborn wizards in that particular orphanage's care?"

Charlotte thought for a moment.

"Officially, no. I did send one of interns there maybe a week ago to investigate a report of accidental magic, but my intern has been late with her report. Now that you mention it, that is rather odd, considering that Nymphadora has always been great about turning paperwork in on time."

With a heavy sigh, Amelia reached into the top drawer of her desk, and withdrew a vial of Veritaserum. She placed it on the desk, where Charlotte looked at with an air of mistrust.

"Yesterday, Nymphadora Tonks contacted Dumbledore, claiming that Harry Potter had been discovered at the Stonewall muggle orphanage. When pressed, she claimed that the director of Muggleborn Education was attempting to hide evidence of his re-emergence into the Wizarding world."

"That's a lie." Charlotte sputtered in an indignant manner.

"Charlotte, relax," she soothed, "I believe what you're saying, and I just want to clear you from any wrongdoing. Sadly, there's always the possibility that you're under the Imperious Curse."

The woman stiffened at Amelia's words, which wore heavily upon her heart. She was no stranger to how far the reach of evil truly was, considering the countless innocent people she had seen drawn into conflicts that they had no stake in. It still affected her, which was probably the main reason she was immune to the apathy that turned idealistic people into corrupt politicians.

"I'm well aware that you don't have to consent to questioning by Veritaserum, but I would urge you to do so anyway. It works even on people under the Imperious, so it could clear you of all crimes, right now. If I were you I would seize this opportunity, as it would prevent a full scale investigation, which would unfortunately be very invasive."

Charlotte's face grew displeased, fully aware that she had been backed into a corner. Amelia didn't enjoy doing this to the woman, whom she had always had a good relationship with, but if there was a leak at the Ministry, it was necessary to weed it out as soon as possible.

After a few moments, Charlotte nodded.

"I don't like this, Amelia, but it's currently my best option. Let's get this over with."

She gathered up the Veritaserum, and carefully placed three drops of the clear liquid upon Charlotte's tongue. Her eyes immediately glazed over, apparently under the control of the potent potion. However, she knew that there were many ways to fight Veritaserum, so she always did a small test before the actual questioning began. With a slightly evil smile across her face, she addressed Charlotte.

"Is it true that you had a fling with Mundungs Fletcher?"

At her flat answer of "Yes", Amelia broke into high giggles, the like of which few who worked at the Ministry had ever seen. As they tapered off, her face reverted back to seriousness.

"Are you under the Imperious?"

"No."

"Do you have any knowledge of Harry Potter's whereabouts?"

"No."

"Did you conspire to kill Albus Dumbledore?"

"No."

Satisfied, she withdrew the Veritaserum antidote from her desk, and administered it Charlotte. It took effect immediately, with the glazed look in her eyes giving way to a slightly angered one, with a blush rising in her cheeks.

"Amelia, have I told you I fucking hate you lately? If anyone else finds out about this, you're dead."

She let out a chuckle at the threat.

"Don't worry, you're dirty little secret is safe with me." Amelia reassured, placing emphasis on the word dirty. This statement prompted the other woman to groan deeply, and bury her head in her hands.

She gave a final smile at the embarrassed woman, before squeezing her shoulder lightly.

"Seriously though, Charlotte, thank you for being so cooperative. With you exonerated, we can go straight after Nymphadora and apprehend her before anything too bad happens. Do you know where she is now?"

Charlotte nodded her head in affirmation.

"About a week ago, she requested a day to spend with the Auror intern, Siegfried. She wanted to learn how artifact storage worked. I didn't think anything of it at the time, but she was scheduled to meet up with him at seven this morning."

Amelia cursed loudly at the news, before jumping up. If Tonks was scheduled for access to the warehouse, her wand would have been registered to bypass the security wards. Whether it was by Imperious or by her own volition, she was going to steal something from the storage, and it was happening right now.

She ran out of the office, to the waiting Kingsley who had visibly tensed from her violent exit from the office.

"Shacklebolt, Tonks is compromised, and has access to artifact storage." Amelia said without stopping, the senior Auror matching her stride for stride. They entered into the Auror Headquarters, where Dawlish had been positioned, in case the situation with Charlotte had deteriorated. He fell right in step with them, as Amelia laid out the situation without slowing her pace.

"Dawlish, Tonks is compromised. She has access to artifact storage, and is probably there right now. I want her alive, John."

On their way out of the Auror headquarters, they passed junior Auror Williamson going in the opposite direction. The young man started to address the director.

"Good mornn-"

"Williamson," Amelia said, cutting him off, "we've got a security breach on this floor, a young woman named Nymphadora Tonks. She's short, with pink hair. Gather all available Aurors, and lock down this level. No one leaves this floor. Understand?"

"Yes ma'am," the young man answered, before running off to put her command into action.

Her orders given, she stormed onward, senior Aurors in tow, towards artifact storage.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Narcissa Malfoy, using both the body and wand of the deceased Nymphadora Tonks, was beginning to have severe problems with her husband's choice of scapegoat. She really wished Lucius had picked another Mudblood to have a petty vendetta against. While Octavius may have almost no resistance to the Imperious, which allowed her to command him by thought, and was hung like a mountain troll, there were significant drawbacks. It was likely that most first years were more competent with their wands, and if they got caught, he wouldn't be of much use in a fight against the Aurors.

She hadn't really wanted to kill Flint, but her practical side had won out. William had been known for his vindictiveness, and he would have taken her quarry's botched cutter rather personally. At the very least, it tied up a loose end should the situation go sideways, as a dead conspirator wouldn't be spilling any secrets.

The worst part of the whole situation was that she didn't even know if her cover was intact. Lucius' contacts within Muggle Relations had done their job. They had hidden or destroyed all evidence that Harry Potter lived at the orphanage, and performed intentionally poor memory charms on all adult muggles, so the Aurors wouldn't be able to find out just which child had lived in the ruined upstairs room. The only problem was that there were no bodies upstairs, no evidence that either Harry or Dumbledore were dead.

It was the unknown that frightened her. If Dumbledore had lived, there was a good chance that her cover was compromised. With a slight shake to her head, Narcissa banished the traitorous thoughts. If she was compromised, she would deal with it once they had acquired Voldemort's wand.

Mind slightly cleared, she increased her pace down the brightly lit stacks. Artifact storage was a grid comprised of tall, heavy oak shelves, stretching all the way to the ceiling, which must have been thirty feet tall. Stacked wooden boxes, ranging from the size of an Ollivander wand-box to a small room, occupied almost every inch of shelf space. All of the shelves were arranged in long, unbroken rows, parallel to the sides of the storage space. Brooms were a necessity, as there were no ladders of any type to be found, but Lucius had planned for this problem, and had found out which locker they were stored in.

She reached the end of the stack, and hovered. The end of the stacks emptied into a pathway with a single array against the back wall, perpendicular to the other arrays of stacks. The array on the rear wall was comprised of seven shelves, each about twenty feet long, broken by columns of stone, each shelf extending back six feet before meeting the wall.

Shelf twenty was directly in the middle, in clear sight of one of the pathways. It was one of the more cluttered shelves in the warehouse, with most of the boxes on the small side. She pushed against one of the lower shelves, expecting to topple the carefully stacked boxes. Her thrust was met with resistance, as the boxes didn't move, suggesting the clutter extended to the very wall. With a heavy sigh, she accepted the obvious fact that if the upper shelf were this packed, it was not going to be a quick process. It would have been much easier for her if every artifact and box in the warehouse didn't have anti-summoning charms upon them, but that wasn't the case.

With time breathing down her neck, she flew up to the top of the shelf, and inspected the numbers on the boxes closest to her.

38756, 45601, 26419.

"Spectacular" Narcissa said to herself. This lack of organization was going to cost her at least ten minutes, time she wasn't sure that she could spare. She turned to Octavius, and began to speak.

"Octavius, search through the boxes on the top shelf, and find artifact 38723."

She turned away before he could reply, and flew back to the tall stacks she already traveled by. If the Aurors were to storm in, it would be hard to explain why she was at the back of the warehouse. If they arrived before she could make her getaway, she'd have to at least avoid detection in the warehouse. She wasn't bad with a wand, but she didn't stand a chance against the well-trained Aurors. Her only option would be to try to avoid detection.

Hovering on her broom, she withdrew her wand and cast a reductor curse at the light fixture mounted to the ceiling. The crimson curse struck with a loud crash, spraying shards of frosted glass in every direction, spilling the powdered phosphate contained within to the floor. She swept up and down the rows, plunging them into darkness. All she left intact were those at the front of the warehouse, to find the exit easily, and those at the back, to expedite the acquisition of the artifact.

Right as she destroyed the last light, she felt a sense of jubilation enter into her servant's mind. Relief washed over her as she realized that Octavius had found the artifact, the first time all day he hadn't screwed up her plans in some fashion.

"I've found it!"

His yell confirmed what his thoughts had already betrayed. She swung the broom around in the murky darkness and carefully flew towards the lighted part of the warehouse. Upon arriving, she saw him holding a wooden box, roughly the same size as Ollivander's wand boxes.

"Give me the box, Octavius."

The enchanted man complied and handed the box to her. Stamped across the side was the numerical designation 38723, the only marking. She took off the lid carefully and beheld the contents.

The interior of the box was filled with thick, purple velvet, with a single depression in the middle. Within the hollow was a yew wand, which seemed to be about a foot long. With a shiver, she thought of how an entire nation trembled under the might of this wand, how it had nearly brought an entire society to its knees.

"Is this what our mistress wanted?" Octavius questioned, drawing her from her reverie.

She cursed herself for losing herself to wanderings. Time was short now, and there would be plenty of time for awe later. She tucked the small box into a large pocket within her robes, and began to fly back towards the front of the warehouse. She had time to hope that perhaps they would escape unscathed, her cover intact.

That was, before she heard a small, shrill alarm go off, which signified someone was deactivating the wards. With a slight panic, it became clear she was about to have company, and had to make a quick decision.

After a moment's thought, she immediately ordered Octavius to land, softly. She did the same, and gave some quick mental commands.

"Give me your wand, you'll use Flint's. Return to the back of the room, and begin to upturn a shelf, like you're trying to find something quickly. Take the other broom with you, and kill anyone you see."

Under the burden of severe stress, her mental orders were far harder to give, as if having a conversation under water. She didn't know how long she was going to be able to continue mental command of the man, but he did comply with her current requests, albeit slowly. He handed her his wand, before wordlessly gathering the other broom in his hands, and flying back the way they had come. With an eye on the retreating man, she stowed his wand, and withdrew Tonks'. She disillusioned herself with a rap to the head, and cast wordless silencing spells upon her feet. Her spellwork, combined with her earlier sabotage to the lighting, gave her hope that she had a decent chance to slip out the door unnoticed.

Moving quickly, a shadow in darkness, she crept toward the front of the warehouse. As she moved closer, unintelligible voices from the front of the warehouse met her ears. Ten feet from the end of the

stacks, but still under cover of dark, she was close enough to understand the voices.

"...happened then, Siegfried?"

An older woman's voice, which sounded very similar to director Bones. Probably was her.

"I...I gave him the location. He said he would kill me!" Siegfried said, his voice raised defensively, in justification.

There was a derisive snort following his statement, which sounded like it probably came from a male.

"Its okay, Siegfried. You did the smart thing," a calm, deep male voice reassured, "someone who would kill William like that wouldn't have any problem with doing the same to you if you hadn't cooperated."

It definitely sounded like Kingsley Shacklebolt. The "snorter" must have been another man.

"I assume you were then stunned?" Bones asked.

"Yeah, I think so. I didn't see it coming. I don't even know what that guy did with Tonks." Siegfried replied in a quiet, defeated voice.

There was a short silence, which was eventually broken by the Director.

"We have very good reason to believe that Tonks was a participant in this mess. Are you sure that they were the only two people you saw?"

Narcissa never heard the reply, as a resounding crash echoed from the back of the warehouse, followed by several smaller ones. Octavius' distraction was even louder than she anticipated, as the sound amplified off the vast dimensions of the room, making it seem as one was being devoured by the crashes.

Almost immediately, she heard three pairs of footsteps take off in a sprint, moving towards the sound of the ruckus. As soon as the loud bootfalls began to decrease in volume, she crept beyond the edge of

the stacks. Confident in her disillusionment charm, she walked right to the edge of the entryway. Siegfried was sitting with his head down, not paying any attention to his surroundings. This worked perfectly for her, since she could just fell him with a quick stunner and make her way out the door.

With graceful movements, she planted her hands on the counter cut into the wall, which separated the entryway and the warehouse. She put her weight on her hands, and carefully hoisted herself onto the counter, seating herself upon it. As she looked on, Siegfried brought his head up, and began to stare at the wall. Slowly, she spun around on her rear, to get off the counter. As soon as her legs touched the space where the counter ended, her disillusionment charm winked out of existence.

She briefly had time to realize there was a glamour-dispelling ward in place before her sudden appearance registered on Siegfried's peripherals. He turned to her, his open mouth in shock, as she grasped for her wand. His eyes followed her hand movements, which caused his look of surprise to be replaced by one of terror.

"IT'S HER! TONKS! HEL-"

His scream was abruptly cut off by a stunner. For the third time today, the young man collapsed to the ground. In her sudden panic, she vaguely felt her mental connection to Octavius severed. She jumped off the counter and scrambled to the door, throwing it open wildly. She began to sprint, before catching the sight the rapidly approaching receptacle on her right. She stopped herself right before she crossed the threshold that would have locked her inside an inescapable magical field. Clumsily withdrawing her wand, she de-activated the field and sprinted down the hall.

Right before she reached the end of the warded section, the warehouse door was blasted off its hinges. John Dawlish shot through the formerly occupied space, mounted atop the broom she had given to Octavius. He stopped long enough to deactivate the wards, before shooting through. He leveled his wand at her as she retreated, barely avoiding his hastily aimed slicing curse, proving that even an Auror had trouble casting from a broom. As she passed the outside boundary of the security ward, inspiration struck her.

She withdrew Octavius' wand and pressed it to the ward keystone within the receptacle. Dawlish was charging at her upon his broom, and only had time to register slight surprise before the stout blue magical barriers sprang into existence. The tip of the broom handle hit the barrier milliseconds ahead of his body, which collided with the unmovable wall face-first with a mighty crack, leaving a large bloody imprint upon the shimmering blue.

Narcissa turned from the limp, falling body and sprinted the rest of the way down the hallway. She caught her breath for a moment, mentally calming herself, before pointing her wand at her hair. With a quick incantation, she changed the hair to a more ordinary chestnut brown. She wasn't very well known by the Aurors, so if they were on the hunt for her, the lack of pink hair might buy her a little time. Despite how much disdain there was for cosmetic spells by most wizards, she was acutely grateful for her knowledge of them, especially at this point in time. Feeling slightly calmer, she opened the door and stepped through.

The large hallway that served as the connecting path to every other part of the DMLE was about twelve feet wide, a large expanse that ran the entire floor. Portraits and doors took turns above the walls, the various occupants of the paintings rushing to their neighbors and having whispered conversations. The human occupancy was rather sparse, with only the occasional Auror dotted along the hallway, always standing close to a specific door, with sharp, watchful eyes.

With a curse, she realized they were probably securing any exits, since Bones probably ordered a lockdown. The elevators, the only way she knew out, were probably guarded tighter than anything else. It was actually miraculous that no one had accosted her after leaving the warehouse entrance. The only chance she had to escape was to draw attention away from the elevators. She patted her pockets, praying that she hadn't lost her trump card in her previous excitement. When her fingers found the bulbous shape, a smile formed onto her face.

She began to walk in the opposite direction of the elevators and Auror Headquarters. Eyes alert, she noticed a door that didn't have any Aurors standing near it, probably a closet or something else equally unimportant. As she approached it, she subtly placed a hand in her pocket, and squeezed the object hard. Lucius hadn't told her the name of it, but she had been made well aware of its effects. With

a quick movement, she opened the door slightly, and threw the object into it. She closed the door quickly, and began to walk away quickly, maintaining a count within her head. She groaned aloud when she realized an Auror far down the hall had seen her open the door.

Thirty.

"Miss?"

She put her head down and walked faster, putting distance between herself and the door.

Twenty-five.

"Miss?"

The man was louder his time, and also seemed to be following her.

Twenty.

"You, with the brown hair, stop!"

She stopped at the yell, as a nearby man who also had brown hair looked around in confusion. Their eyes met, and she smiled at him, giving him a shrug.

Fifteen.

She turned, and adopting a puzzled expression upon her face at the approaching Auror, who looked at her with a scowl.

Ten.

"What's his issue?" The man behind her asked.

Five.

The approaching Auror drew his wand right as he arrived at the door she had thrown Lucius' object into. His fingers grasped the handle.

Zero.

A loud explosion ripped through the hallway, disintegrating the Auror that stood in front of the door. Wooden, flaming shrapnel fell in a rain, as thick clouds of dust rolled through the hallway. In the ensuing confusion she subtly drew her wand and fired a stunner at the brown-haired man closer to her. He fell inconspicuously to the ground, and she rushed over to him. Reaching down, she grabbed him by the shoulders, and began to pull him towards the elevator. Yelling Aurors rushed past her, paying her no notice.

The muscles in her back straining, she finally reached the bank of elevators. As she had hoped, there was only one person standing guard, a junior Auror named Williamson.

"Shite," Narcissa said to herself. She had spoken with Williamson; he knew who she was. She waved him over to help with the body. She hoped the hair change and dust-covered clothes would be enough to give her some time.

The young Auror stowed his wand as he approached, worry etched upon his features.

"Look, I can't help you much," Williamson began, "this level's in lockdown, and I'm watching the elevators while the other Aurors check out that loud blast."

With a quick movement she produced her wand and felled the surprised junior Auror with a stunner. He flopped to the ground, unseen in the mayhem that currently consumed the level. She ran to the nearest elevator and called it. Eyes darting wildly around, making sure she was unnoticed, she heard the door open and stepped through.

"Stop, this level's in lockdown!"

She turned to see Tonks' former boss, Charlotte Lewis, standing there. Narcissa gave her an evil smile while punching the Atrium button on the elevator. A look of shock flitted across the woman's face, only to be replaced by anger. She drew her wand and fired a cutting curse at Narcissa. The yellow curse hit Narcissa's shoulder in a splash of blood, knocking her back slightly.

"Why won't the fucking door close!" Narcissa screeched, jabbing the corresponding button on the elevator.

The elevator responded to her button-mashing, and the metal door began to close. She saw Charlotte begin to cast another curse, so she cast a magical shield. Charlotte's curse traveled through the slowly closing door and hit Narcissa's shield with a minor detonation. Her shield collapsed, and the magical discharge threw her roughly against the back of the elevator with a crunch, expelling all the air from her lungs. The door fully closed as she hit the ground in agony, shutting off Charlotte's rapidly approaching form. Her last look of the woman revealed rage and sadness.

She thrashed about on the floor, the wind knocked out of her. Gasping for air, she was interrupted by the cool, pleasant female voice announcing arrival into the Atrium. She heaved herself up as the door opened, breath burning in her lungs, blood flowing freely from the wound in her shoulder. She stumbled from the elevator ungracefully, and made her way to the golden gates. She passed through them, and in her peripheral vision saw the hefty form of the security wizard heave his bulk out of the guard shack.

"Halt!"

She turned to the fat Wizard and snapped off a quick stunner at him. The spell struck him in the head, knocking him backwards, landing askew back inside the guard shack. A few bystanders gasped at her actions, and a brave few drew their wands, but Narcissa was already running.

She threw herself into the crowd of people that usually inhabited the bustle of the Atrium in the late morning hours. Reaching deep inside, she ignored the pain and started to run through the crowd, knocking people aside as she ran. She knocked an elderly wizard into the fountain, and pushed over a witch who had stopped to look for something in her pockets. More voices had joined the yells of the first bystanders, the indignant cries of those she had trampled on her way to her goal.

The shouts of the Aurors reached her ears right as she reached the apparition point. With a loud pop she disappeared, leaving destruction, mayhem and frustrated Aurors in her wake.

That was the last glance at Nymphadora Tonks the world would ever receive.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Author Notes:

This chapter concludes the first arc of the story, which covered the fallout from Harry being sent Slytherin's ring and the situation that inspired him receiving it. While the events that have occurred will have far reaching and unforeseen consequences, all the immediate impact has been covered. From here on out the story will become more Harry centric, but there will still be plenty of scenes from the point-of-views of other characters.

I think that next chapter will be out by late July, but time shall tell.

Any comments, suggestion or criticisms would be deeply appreciated. I'll make an effort to answer every review I get.

Thanks to my co-conspirator, darklordmike, for his valuable suggestions with plotting, characterization, continuity and grammar.

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Thanks for reading.

Fifth Movement: A Blaze at Dawn

It was the song that started it all.

He had been adrift in an endless abyss, completely incapable of coherent thought. Pain was the only definition of the world, mercilessly crushing and obliterating any attempts to find a center. Without intervention, he could have laid there forever, losing his thoughts as soon as they formed, under a scorched sky.

The song changed it all. The slow, beautiful trills banished the tide of pain, allowed for him to reclaim his sense of self. The burned and blistered wastelands began to recede, to be replaced by the greenery that Harry once thought gone forever. It was the sight of green, the color usually associated with life, which planted the seed of hope. Maybe, after all this, everything would turn out alright.

The song wasn't merely content to restore the greenery, thankfully. From the skeletal, blackened remains of the house, it began to mend itself. Like a plant flowering forth from the ashes of a brushfire, the house began to slowly materialize. Hallways, rooms, windows all began to grow, right before his eyes, expanding towards its former shape. As quickly as it had begun, it stopped, almost as if it had been completely reformed within the space of a moment.

The cornerstone of his mind rebuilt, Harry took off running towards the front door of the house. He threw the door open, to the foyer that had become familiar to him. Like a child returning home from school, he rushed into the living room, and turned on the TV. Instead of the live feed to reality he had been expecting, the thick screen remained dark.

He scrambled toward the CD player, his aural link, tearing the headphones from the jack on the stereo. He frantically pressed the disc change button, only to have the selector skip over the fifth disk, as if it didn't exist. With growing fear, he sprinted into the kitchen, and threw open the stove, only to be greeted by a complete lack of sensory information.

His suspicions were confirmed. He was cut off from the world.

It seemed safe to assume that he wasn't in danger of being possessed anymore, as his senses weren't even being used.

However, he hadn't the faintest idea where that left him. Was he in a coma, wasting away in some hospital? Had Voldemort's final revenge been to trap him in his mind forever, a prisoner within his own thoughts?

He could have easily breached the shields around his mind, and regained control, but trepidation stilled his hand. He was reasonably certain that there had been a long stretch of time where his possessor had successfully kept him sedated. Who knew how long he had been suppressed? Even worse, though, was the thought of the horrible things he may have done. He suspected the images his mind showed him, of a young woman being brutally killed, were more than a dream. If he were to wake up, would he be charged as a murderer? Was his possession even provable?

So instead of testing the limits of his mind, he paced ceaselessly through the halls of the house, the omnipotent song dulling his anguish somewhat, and keeping the worst of his demons from terrorizing him. Apart from a vague sadness whenever he entered the library or the kitchen, he had no memories of this place. Had it been his childhood home?

The key to everything, he knew, was contained within the vault in the basement. For hours on end he would turn the dial on the combination lock, always without luck. When he grew frustrated with the guessing game, he would bang his fists against the cold, indifferent steel of the door, his eyes growing damp with agonized frustration.

Harry could follow the logic of the situation quite clearly. Obviously, whatever memories his mind had contained were far too volatile for Voldemort to get a hold of. Any hints he left behind as to the actual combination, would have to have been hidden extremely well, lest they fall into hands of the evil entity. That is, if there were any clues at all. Perhaps his past self hadn't left any.

The pursuit of knowledge, of clues, left the house looking as if a tornado had raged through it. It could have been days, it could have been hours, but eventually a moment arrived where Harry just gave up, all hope of discovering the combination gone.

He had no past, no previous experience to color his world. He couldn't help but wonder if it would have been better to just let

Voldemort have the memories that once held free residence within his mind. Perhaps the evil man would have used his knowledge to wreak terrible things, but at least he'd have a sense of self, an identity.

Yet through all his moments of self-doubt and despair, the song always remained. The more he listened to it, the more he thought that it was not just a song of healing. Though no parts were comprehensible, it seemed to speak to a corner of his soul that was beyond mortal language. It was almost magnetic, as if imploring him to leave the empty comfort and security of his mind, and venture back out into reality.

Indeed, why shouldn't he go back? There's obviously not much left in this place for him. Currently, it was less a house and more an empty tomb. At the very least, the song appeared to have restored his broken mind. Would a song this beautiful, capable of such good, truly lead him astray?

When put that simply, it sealed the decision for him. Each successive step, as he moved toward the shimmering, permeable shield that enclosed his mind, seemed heavier than the last. A few steps from the border between realities, it felt as if he were wading through cement.

He took one look back towards the large house. He expected to feel a pang of nostalgia, but there was nothing, no longer had he any memories to anchor to it, as his oldest memories involved being picked up by a police officer. If he hadn't been already dedicated to his current course of action, his final glance drove the truth home, showing his reluctance to leave as being purely a reaction to the consequences he may face when back in the real world. There was nothing left for him here.

Harry faced the opaque blue shield, with his face set in determination. With only the slightest bit of trepidation, he stepped through the blue shield, and exited the confines of his mind.

Harry faced the opaque blue shield, with his face set in determination. With only the slightest bit of trepidation, he stepped through the blue shield. His body was met with minimal resistance as it passed through the shining luminescence. He felt a sudden

urge to take one last glance back, but feared that it would kill his nerve.

Beyond the confines of his mind lay an expanse of infinite darkness, stretching out in all directions. He strained his eyes, and looked for the exit, his pupils dilating to pin pricks. At last, he finally saw it, a small sliver of light, which looked as if it were a million miles away.

His destination found, he began to float towards it, the cold breath of infinity brushing against him as he moved. As he moved closer, the sliver of light grew slightly bigger, and began to develop its own magnetism. Before he could take another breath, the attraction grew ten-fold, hurling him even more carelessly, he sped toward the growing light.

He pulled in air to scream, but found the oxygen ripped from his lungs by the ever-increasing velocity. The light battered as his pupils as the light enveloped his entire vision. A silent scream frozen upon his lips, his world exploded as he collided with the rift.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Out of the many possible scenarios that Harry's fear had conjured during his indeterminate incarceration, the one that greeted his senses was one he hadn't envisioned.

He wasn't sure if he'd ever felt such vast comfort before. The bed he lay on was soft enough to make him feel weightless, but firm enough to keep him from sinking. He thought it was probably magically enhanced, as the comfort level seemed to be the alchemists' answer to bedding.

The same song that healed his mind, and had convinced him to take leave of his mind, continued to trill. Upon opening his eyes, he was met by the sight of the song's source.

It was a large bird, roughly the same size as a swan. Its plumage was a deep crimson, with a gold-feathered tail that hung far below its body. Sharp, golden talons grasped the bird perch nestled right next to the window, where the strange bird regarded him with dark eyes shining bright with intelligence.

Phoenix?, Harry thought to himself, slightly shocked. He thought for a moment, before the probable truth arrived, putting his mind at ease.

He hadn't seen much of it during their fight at the orphanage, but he vaguely recalled a phoenix assisting Dumbledore, and absorbing a killing curse meant for a child. If it was allowed to heal his mind, then his expectation of facing an inquisition upon his awakening were false.

Feeling slightly foolish, Harry addressed the phoenix.

"Thanks for the help."

The bright bird seemed to be satisfied at Harry's show of gratitude. He wasn't exactly surprised it understood him, considering all that it seemed to be capable of. It gave out a short, final trill, which Harry interpreted as "you're welcome", before disappearing in a flash of flames.

Its abrupt departure startled him initially, but he recovered quickly, and began to take inventory of the room. It was rather spacious, lit by the sunlight filtering in through two large, open windows to his right. With the phoenix song gone, he could hear the crashing of waves coming in through the window, as well as the light smell of sea salt.

The room was constructed from almost seamless white masonry, which gave the room a serene, calming atmosphere. The only dark counterpoint to the white walls was the wooden framing of the windows and doors, as well as the furniture. They were composed of a dark wood that was polished to flawlessness, and practically shone under the sun's rays.

While it seemed a crime to abandon such comfortable bedding, Harry gingerly began to do so. The pain in his extremities wasn't as extreme as he had been anticipating, with only stiffness and minor discomfort as opposed to the tsunami of agony he expected. Either he hadn't been comatose for a great deal of time, or whoever had cared for him had been meticulous in their efforts.

It would have been more prudent to stay in bed, to succumb to the invisible fingers pulling his eyelids downward, but ultimately his

decision was without debate. To just lay back would be concession of sorts, a defeat of his will. The very thought was abhorrent, though he couldn't accurately describe why.

For lack of a better destination, he cautiously made his way to the open window. The brine grew stronger in his nostrils as he approached, the roar of the waves louder. Upon reaching it, he reached out to the windowsill and steadied himself, labored breaths shuddering his frame, head down.

As his strength and wind returned, he brought his head up and beheld the sight before him. His room was nestled right up against the water front, with waves crashing against the cliffs walls that his room was perched against. The room faced westward, giving him a view of the setting sun. All that remained of it was an orange half-circle peeking over the edge of the horizon, throwing the ocean into brilliant reds and oranges.

Harry had no inkling of where he might be, but two things were very clear to him. First, it seemed safe to assume that they didn't mean him harm, but what was their motivation for taking care of him? What favor would they be looking for in return?

Well, whoever they are, you're not going to gain anything by being confrontational. Listen, wait, observe. Be pleasant, polite, but don't volunteer anything you don't have to. Whatever motivations these people have, will reveal themselves if you're patient.

Secondly, the view certainly did not suck. In fact, he was of the firm belief he'd never seen anything as beautiful before.

So enthralled was Harry by the sunset that he barely heard the knocking upon his door, and discarded it as irrelevant. He was shaken from the sight when the knocking began, more heavily than before, but at a slow, even tempo, free from any authoritative quality.

The sudden disappearance of the phoenix now made slightly more sense. It probably alerted the owners of the home of his new found consciousness. With slight unease, he awkwardly hobbled away from the windowsill, and threw on the pajama tops that were draped across the chair next to the window. If he was going to meet the people responsible for his care, he should probably be dressed.

He ignored the growing cramps in his legs and made his way to the door. He composed himself with a deep breath before opening it.

In the doorway stood an older man and woman, which Harry assumed to be husband and wife. They both had white hair, but their faces were devoid of the heavy folds and creases that typically accompanied old age. They both had slightly anxious looks upon their face, which was a pale reflection of the deep awkwardness Harry felt.

What am I supposed to say to these people? Harry thought to himself, at a loss as to how to proceed.

You should probably act grateful, but slightly disoriented. That's probably what their expecting.

He was saved by the woman, who broke the short silence first.

"Harry, it is good to see you that have awoken. How are you feeling?"

Her voice was warm, caring, of genuine concern. He felt himself began to relax at her words, began to hope that perhaps they weren't part of any greater agenda. Perhaps he should show some gratitude.

"I'm feeling okay," he answered, "much better than expected. Thanks for looking out for me."

The woman smiled brightly at his thanks, as did her husband, albeit in a far more restrained manner.

"It was our pleasure, Harry. My name is Perenelle Flamel."

She moved forward after her statement, hand extended. Harry took it lightly and pumped it once.

"And this is my husband, Nicolas."

The man, only slightly taller than his wife, stepped forward and shook hands with him. His grip was strong, firm, not betraying any signs of age.

"Good to finally meet you, Harry. Both myself and my wife have been taking care of your recovery. Dumbledore asked us to, since his Hogwarts responsibilities do not give him much time to properly care for someone."

At the mention of Dumbledore's name, he panicked, and brought his left hand up to his face. The fear in his eyes departed upon seeing all of his digits were bereft of jewelry, and he let out a sigh of relief. He had completely forgotten about the ring, but her mention of Dumbledore had brought the cursed object to the forefront of his awareness.

Perenelle's hand found his shoulder, and began to rub it softly.

"That evil ring is never going to hurt you again, I promise."

Harry nodded in response. He wasn't exactly fond of the contact, but could appreciate the gesture for what it was, an attempt to reassure and comfort him.

It was Nicolas that spoke up next.

"Our residence is far away from the scrutiny of the public eye, and no one is going to bother you here. We just want to provide a calm, quiet place to overcome your ordeal."

He found himself more assured by Nicolas' words. The prospect of staying out of the public's notice appealed to him.

"Thanks."

"Once again, it is our pleasure. I'm sure Fawkes has by now alerted Dumbledore to your awakening, and he will want to meet you."

"Only, of course, once you're ready." Perenelle hastened to add.

Harry wasn't exactly surprised at her protectiveness, probably her maternal instinct kicking in.

"I want to meet him as soon as I can. If he didn't come to the orphanage..." Harry trailed off, playing up the moment slightly. He was grateful for the care he had been given, but more than anything he wanted to thank the man that had set him free personally.

Perenelle's expression saddened at Harry's implication.

"I understand, Harry."

The cramps ratcheted up their discomfort to a new level after her words, causing him to stumble slightly, with a grimace of pain upon his face.

The two Flamels moved to help him, but Harry waved them off, a slight smile upon his face.

"Thanks, but I can do this myself."

Perenelle looked ready to object, but Nicolas placed his hand upon her shoulder, and squeezed slightly. He saw that he didn't look pleased by her husband's gesture, but said nothing as he turned and hobbled back to the bed.

As the bed approached, he felt the exertion of his movements catch up with him. He could barely keep his eyes open as he collapsed upon the bed, facedown. In spite of the fatigue washing over him, he rolled over, and beheld the Flamels.

He didn't have that great of a read on them, but it certainly appeared they genuinely wanted to help him, and he would be foolish to turn away help at this point in time.

"Thank you both, for looking out after me." Harry said, his words fading out at the end, sleep close to claiming him.

"Once again, Harry, it is our pleasure," Nicholas spoke, "You are mostly healed, but you still need your rest. We will see you in the morning."

The last thing he heard before slumber took him away was Perenelle's voice.

"Pleasant dreams, Harry."

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

The next time Harry awoke, it was to night. He rolled over, attempting to find a more comfortable position better suited for a descent into slumber, but as if a switch had been turned, he found himself devoid of all will to sleep.

He gave it a valiant effort, but after what seemed like an hour of shutting his eyes, he conceded that there would be no more sleep for tonight. It was more than simply not being tired, however. Deep within the recesses of his mind, he felt something like an itch, almost like a compulsion. It spoke of wasting time, clamoring to do something a bit more productive than lay about in bed.

Strange as the feeling was, he certainly couldn't argue with it. Sleep was no closer than it had been upon waking up. Conceding defeat, he mentally prepared himself to rise, knowing full-well it was going to be unpleasant.

Gingerly, grimacing in anticipation of the accompanying aches, he stretched out. The pains never came to pass, he was surprised to note. Still somewhat leery, he brushed the covers aside, but still felt no hint of the discomfort he had felt earlier.

Throwing caution to the wind, in one swift movement he leaped off the bed, landing cat-like on all fours upon the hardwood floor. It appeared that the Flamels, armed with certain knowledge he'd awaken, had eased his pains.

Harry was pleased to note that his journey to the window was far less arduous than his one several hours previous, completely free of pain or hardship. With leg movement being far less of an issue to him, and the windowsill being very wide, he sat down upon it, and swung his legs over. His feet dangled off into a black abyss, as the sea wind batted lightly at his pajamas.

Within his mind, the sun had never set. It was like a virtual photograph, very detailed but ultimately unchanging. The thousands of pinpricks of light in the dark, clear sky above was his first glimpse of the night sky in months. It soothed him more than he could ever hope to articulate, brought to him a deep sense of relief. He was truly safe now, and actually had the opportunity to sort through his own thoughts, figure things out.

It was clear to him that his past was currently a complete loss. That was out of his hands, as seemed to be the combination to his secret memories. So then, what could he recall?

There were vague memories of being picked up by a police officer, but he couldn't name the location, or anything particular. It made sense that he would have been picked up close to his relatives, or whomever he had been staying with, but luck wasn't on his side. If the police, with their vast networking capabilities, hadn't been able to locate where he had come from, then he didn't like his chances. A voice from deep within his mind chose that moment to speak up.

Unless it had been hidden from muggle eyes...

That did make sense, or at least was plausible. It was probably his best chance, considering that afterwards, he had been sent to the orphanage. No, if there was a link to his past, it was when he arrived in this world, at the exact point his memories started again.

What about the ring?

The ring really bothered him. Who would have a vendetta against a ten-year old? Someone capable of finding such a powerful object, capable of such evil, would have probably needed vast power themselves to keep from being destroyed by the ring. What had he done to attract such deadly attention?

Dumbledore's probably doing his best to track down the ring himself. Focus more on the present.

Fine, then. All signs pointed to him staying with the Flamels for a long time. He didn't have a great deal of experience with the couple to really know them well, but his first impressions were favorable. Their concern for him did seem genuine, or at the very least they were good at faking it. It probably wasn't a stretch to assume Nicolas, Perenelle and Dumbledore were old friends.

Judging by the apparent location of the manor, and its size, the Flamels were certainly not wanting for wealth, so he scratched financial considerations from the list. Most likely it was a favor for Dumbledore, as the Headmaster would appear to have too many things going on to care for him.

Who was he kidding? Dumbledore had earned his complete and utter trust. If Dumbledore trusted the Flamels enough to leave him under their care, then they must be alright. He would give them the benefit of the doubt until proven otherwise.

It's settled. What about your past?

He hadn't any idea how long he had been under, but thought it safe to say that a great number of people had contributed to his recovery, specialists of all types. With the damage he remembered sustained from his fight with Dumbledore, it was a certainty. If he were to let on that his past was a complete mystery, the Flamels may conjure mental specialists.

This was something Harry had no intention of letting happen. No one was messing around with his head. Whatever his past had hid, it was something that was so dangerous, or volatile that he had purposefully destroyed his sense of past. Voldemort himself had been inside his mind, and the locked vault had withstood his most violent assaults, but had been rushed in his efforts. If Voldemort had more time, Harry thought it safe to assume he may find a way through. He had little doubt a mental specialist would do the same.

As much as Harry was curious about his past, he understood the magnitude of the sacrifice that had been made. By letting someone else force their way in, he would be negating his own choice and letting loose whatever hid in his mind. For now, he would just have to deal with it. Besides, he had certainly had his fill of uninvited guests in his mind for the year.

So where does that leave you?

His best option was probably to stall. If asked, he could always claim the memories of his past were too painful to recall. If he could buy enough time, he could show the Flamels, or anyone else for that matter, that he was more than capable of functioning without assistance. With enough time, he could probably come up with a plausible explanation that would hold up to light scrutiny.

In his ponderings, night shifted into day, the black sea slowly brightening to deep blue. He expected one of the Flamels might be up to check on him, so he moved from the windowsill, and over to

the closet. Upon opening the door, he was greeted by what appeared to be the entire color spectrum, in robe form.

Not feeling particularly vibrant or flamboyant, he withdrew a robe of deep navy. It fit quite nicely, which wasn't all that surprising. It seemed more than safe to assume that his apparently wealthy benefactors had taken his measurements while he was under, preparing for his eventual awakening. And, judging by the eye-wateringly blinding colors of some of the garments, should he wake up one morning with the urge to wreak vengeance upon the collective sight of the world.

After getting dressed, he was tempted to go out and explore, but decided against it. A person his age who was roaming the property this early was one that was having trouble sleeping, which would prompt questions. If he were to at least maintain a veneer of everything being fine, perhaps that would cause less questions to be asked.

The room was at a severe loss for means of entertainment, so again he returned to the window, watching as the sun slowly ascended from the east, setting the crashing waves alight in a blaze of gold.

Harry thought it quite appropriate. His old life has been scorched away by the evil that had been contained within the rain. Breathing deeply of the night air, Harry began to feel a sense of renewal. He may not have been reborn from ashes, but he had secured a second chance. He had survived a madman's attempt to annihilate his very being. He was still here.

His musings were interrupted by a soft knock at the door. He gracefully leapt backwards off the windowsill, and opened the door before the second rap fell upon it. Perenelle stood beyond the threshold, her hand frozen half-way through the motion of a second knock, a smile creeping upon her face.

"Good morning, Harry. Did you happen to be waiting by the door for me?"

Harry himself smiled slightly in response, before replying.

"No, I was by the window, looking at the sunrise. I've never seen anything like it."

She nodded.

"It certainly is a sight to behold. Judging your quick movements, it seems that you are feeling a lot better than last night. Are you feeling faint or dizzy at all?"

"No," Harry replied, shaking his head. "Whatever you gave me after I fell asleep made all the aches go away."

"Wonderful! The young usually are resistant to the side-effects of healing potions, and it appears you are no different."

"Mrs. Flamel, thanks for everything, I really appreciate it," Harry spoke, trying to inject the sincerity he felt into his voice.

Oddly, she looked both humbled and embarrassed by his thanks.

"Harry, it was our pleasure to help you. You have certainly had a rough time of it, and we just want to provide a nice place for you to heal, relax, and get away from the insanity of the real world. All that I will ever ask of you in return is that you never refer to me as 'Mrs. Flamel' again."

He gave her a reassuring smile at her declaration. "That sounds fair to me."

Perenelle nodded.

"Now that the matter of my name has been settled, would you care for some breakfast?"

Harry nodded enthusiastically in response. When had he last eaten solid food? He couldn't even remember.

He followed her out of the room, into a hallway constructed from the same white masonry that his room had been. Small wooden tables lay halfway between each door, each with a different ornate lamp upon them, while the floor appeared to be carved from marble.

Perenelle slowed so that he could walk beside her, and she began to talk.

"This is the guest wing of the house. The room you were in was only temporary. Now that you are awake, we will move you to a larger, better room."

Harry didn't see what was so bad about the room he had just left, but didn't really mind either way, so he just nodded in response.

The hallway opened out onto the second floor of a grand hall, comprised mostly of the familiar white masonry. Alcoves placed all over the hall alternated between ornate marble statues and carvings, with the occasional elaborate skylight on the upper alcoves. He stopped walking, unwilling to spend any mental energy on anything aside from trying to take in the architectural marvels.

Perenelle's light chuckle pulled him away from his visual inspection, where she was looking at him with humor in her eyes.

"The Flamels have traditionally been a very ostentatious family. My husband and I like to think us above such bourgeois lifestyles, but then again we are rather attached to the place."

He nodded as she began to descend the staircase, which curved to the left, at a gradual ninety-degree angle, to join the main staircase in the center of the hall. Harry followed, his bare feet barely making a sound upon the spotless floor.

At the bottom of the stairs she took a right, and passed through a wide set of oak double doors, which were propped open. Within was a long dining table comprised of a dark wood, with a capacity of perhaps fifty people. Portraits lined the right side of the room, with wide windows on the other side, ornamental ironwork set into them.

"Using this table would be a bit much for our current dining needs," Perenelle stated, passing the gargantuan table without a second glance. She passed through the closed double doors at the other end of the room, into a large kitchen, white marble countertops gleaming in the sun. To the left of the cooking area was a small wooden table, where Nicolas sat, the Daily Prophet opened wide, a slight look of disgust upon his face.

At the sound of the approaching footsteps, his expression brightened. He closed and folded the paper up, and tossed it to the floor.

"Good morning Harry," Nicolas greeted, "I trust that you're feeling much better today?"

"Much better," Harry assured, "whatever you gave me last night worked wonders."

Nicolas smiled fondly at Harry's words.

"I should hope so, young man. It would be quite embarrassing to have word get out that I was losing my touch."

Perenelle rolled her eyes at her husband's words, but Harry found himself intrigued.

"You made those yourself, sir?"

"Indeed I did," Nicolas stated, "while I could have bought them, no self-respecting Potion Master would purchase that which they can brew themselves. However, we can speak of that later. I assume that right now, breakfast is your number one priority."

Harry nodded quickly in agreement, with his stomach fully giving its approval.

"Have a seat then, we will take care of everything else."

He didn't exactly feel comfortable with being waited on, but figured at this juncture it would be rude to speak up, so he took the seat to the right of Nicolas at the square table. Just as Perenelle took her seat to his left, breakfast appeared on the table, which caused Harry to flinch back in surprise.

"I am deeply sorry, Harry, we should have given you some sort of warning," Perenelle apologized.

Harry, feeling slightly embarrassed, shook his head. "It's okay, it just surprised me a little. Besides, I would be an idiot to complain about breakfast appearing before me, with no wait time."

Both of the Flamels smiled at him.

"Well, in that case, Harry, don't wait for us. Do your worst."

He didn't need to be told twice.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry never knew gluttony could feel so good. His stomach full, he reclined against the chair, wondering how much effort it would take to tailor his robes to accommodate his expanded waistline.

"Well, Harry, you seem to have enjoyed your first real meal here." Perenelle mused.

He nodded in agreement, as even speaking required effort.

"I know that you have certainly stuffed yourself," Nicolas spoke, "but I was about to head out to my Potions lab. Would you be interested in seeing it?"

His body immediately protested, insisting that he do nothing but lay around the entire day. However, his mind had other ideas, and was a cruel dictator, leading him to nod in response.

"Wonderful. Are you ready now, or do you need time to recuperate?"

Harry's affirmative response was once forged from pure will. He rose slowly, feeling the full weight of the eggs, kippers, sausages, fruit and juice ingested earlier. Attempting to be polite, he started to clear the table, before Perenelle placed a hand upon his arm.

"Thank you for the consideration, Harry, but it is already taken care of. Have fun with Nicolas, I will see you later today." She rounded upon Nicolas, a playful smile upon her face.

"Take good care of this one, he is not expendable, unlike most of our guests."

Nicolas laughed at her jest.

"If you insist, milady, no harm shall befall this young soul."

With that, Nicolas began walking back the way they had come, prompting him to follow. They emerged out into the main hall, and crossed the wide expanse, to a magnificently carved double door,

that he assumed served as the main entrance. Nicolas paused before opening the doors, and regarded him.

"We could have just gone out the side-door in the kitchen, but I thought you might want a glimpse of the grounds."

"Yeah, I'm curious to see how big this place really is," Harry replied.

At his assertion, Nicolas pushed open the doors. Beyond lay an area roughly the size of three football fields, stacked side by side. A wide lane of white gravel stretched out directly in front of them, graded to an almost unnatural flatness, with stone walls on either side. On the other side of the stone walls was lush greenery, the likes of which Harry had never been privy too, not even in picture format. Every color of the rainbow was represented a hundred times over by the various flowers and plants, many of which he assumed could only be magical in nature. He doubted that Eden itself could have done any better.

"Makes for an impressive sight, does it not?" Nicolas asked rhetorically.

"That's putting it mildly," Harry said quietly, his eyes still trying to drink in all that lay before him. Glancing to the side, he saw that the greenery extended all the way to the edge of house, before ending in a high stone wall.

"I do not possess much of a flair for herbology, but my wife is quite the prodigy with regards to it. With the help of the house-elf, she maintains the front, and her own greenhouse."

Harry followed Nicolas' gaze, which went to a large glass structure about halfway between them and the edge of the property. Directly across from it, on the other side of the lane, was a smaller, more compact building, partially buried in the ground.

Nicolas began walking, maintaining his dialogue with Harry.

"How much do you know about potions?"

Harry thought for a moment, letting the moment linger. He felt bad about deceiving these two people, who had treated him with kindness. Sadly, he had to protect the secret of his past at all costs.

He had some knowledge of them, but couldn't recall where he had learned about them. Most likely he had learned about them in his previous life.

"Not much. Perenelle mentioned them, and how they helped my healing. Are they medicines?"

"You do not miss much, do you Harry?" Nicolas asked, giving him an encouraging smile.

"I guess not." Harry replied quietly. He couldn't describe why, but praise made him slightly uncomfortable.

"Medicine is one of the many things that you can create with potions. I have spent a great deal of my life making potions, experimenting with them. In my time, I have actually achieved my fair share of notoriety with my exploits, but that is a story for another day."

Nicolas abruptly stopped, surprising Harry. Glancing to his right, he saw that there was a walkway that led from the main path, which cut its way through a copse of high, dense shrubbery. The path led to a solid-looking, black iron door.

"We do not exactly anticipate potential thieves finding our home, but in the event that they do, there are security measures in place."

Nicolas regarded Harry, adopting a serious expression for perhaps the first time since meeting him.

"I do not mean to frighten you Harry, but some of the measures I have in place here are...unpleasant. I manually disable them in the morning, but activate them every time I leave my lab for an extended period of time. It is very important that you never venture out here without me. Are we clear?"

Harry nodded, before seeing how obviously inadequate the gesture was.

"I understand. I'll never come out here by myself."

Nicolas nodded, apparently satisfied. He withdrew a large key, which seemed to match the door. He placed it into the lock, and let both of them in.

Harry's first impression was of a mad-scientists lair, the type that he sometimes saw on TV during his infrequent trips to the living room during his time in London. The centerpiece of the room was a large wooden counter, upon which lay countless vials, beakers and other glass apparatus he had never seen before. Pushed against the far wall were a row of columns, all of different sizes and compositions.

"Welcome to my potions lab, or as my wife refers to it, 'The Bunker'. Please, have a seat."

He motioned to a tall wooden stool, which Harry, after a bit of a struggle due to the height challenge, placed himself upon. Nicolas leaned against a chalkboard on the wall and began to speak.

"As I mentioned before, I am a Potions Master. It's a rather prestigious title, which only seven people in all of Britain possess. It also has several ceremonial aspects to it, which they have since given up trying to force me to attend."

Harry couldn't help but ponder why any of this mattered.

Nicolas seemed to infer what he was thinking, and chuckled.

"I gave my background not to impress you, Harry, but to establish that I do indeed know exactly what I am talking about, even if my ideas might be slightly...counter-intuitive, I suppose."

Harry thought for a second before replying.

"I guess that makes sense, but why wouldn't I believe you?"

"Too true, Harry. I suppose that I would expect you to be at least somewhat skeptical with me, being that you've really only known me for less than twenty-four hours."

Harry shrugged, while internally he smiled slightly.

Am I really that obvious?

"You were the people that brought me back from....well," his voice dropped an octave, before continuing, "a very dark place." He waited for a second, trying to come up with the right words, that would potentially put Nicolas' mind at ease, and cement the appearance that he would always be honest with the man.

"So far, in ten years...not a lot of good things have happened to me. Almost everything that happens to me...it just goes bad. What happened at the orphanage, well, it was like...losing all hope. I mean...I didn't think I was ever coming back from that.

But, I did. And both you and your wife helped me through that. To me, if you can't trust the two people who saved your life...who can you trust?"

At the end of his monologue, he noticed Nicolas' eyes grow slightly misty, which drove guilt into his heart. While what he said was essentially true, it had been played up slightly for dramatic effect. At that moment, there was nothing more in the world he hated more than his responsibility to protect the contents of his mind.

"Well spoken, Harry," Nicolas stated, his voice quavering slightly, "I can only hope to build upon that trust, to prove to you that we will always be there for you, regardless of circumstance."

"Thank you." Harry spoke, quietly.

Both were silent for a short while, before Nicolas regained his earlier train of thought.

"I know that you are relatively new to the Wizarding world. If you are at all interested, I can teach you a great deal about it, so that by the time you are ready to attend Hogwarts, you will be more comfortable among magical society."

Hogwarts? Harry thought to himself, his brow contracting in thought. The name sounds familiar. Wasn't that the school that Dumbledore taught at?

Nicolas chuckled lightly at his confused response, his eyes now clear.

"Sorry, I intended to introduce you to this world's concepts slowly, and already I am getting ahead of myself. Hogwarts is Britain's school for magical children, considered by most to be the finest school of magic in Europe. Albus Dumbledore is its Headmaster, and many, myself included, believe him to be the finest one who has ever presided over the school in its long history."

That would explain why he wants to teach me about the wizarding world.

"Does everyone have a chance to go?"

"Yes, of course. The British magical government has a method for tracking all witches and wizards, regardless of heritage. All magical children, upon turning eleven, receive letters inviting them to attend Hogwarts. Your mother, Lily, was one of those children who received a letter, who up to that point never knew they were magical."

Harry supposed that made sense. If the government had a way to track magic, perhaps that was why they had sent an agent to investigate him at the orphanage.

"It must be really hard for them to adjust to the magical world."

Nicolas shook his head slightly in response.

"When a person is immersed in magic continuously, it becomes almost second nature. While it may not seem to at first, the transition is usually very quick. Keep in mind, they are using magic on an almost hourly basis. Under those conditions, it is a lot easier than you would think."

"Oh, I guess that makes sense," Harry agreed, nodding. "I assume that potions is one of the subjects taught there?"

"Right you are, Harry," Nicolas replied, favoring him with a look approval. "It is usually the easiest class for muggleborns to get a grasp of, since for the first few years it is little more than following instructions, and doesn't require much, if any magic to be used."

Harry tilted his head to the side, slightly confused.

"I don't get it. That sounds really simple, like reading a cookbook. Why wouldn't everyone get through it easy?"

Nicolas chuckled.

"A reasonable assumption, but it often taxes the mind when you consider how often people struggle to follow simple instructions. Beyond that, though, the first few years are intended for a student to become familiar with the ingredients, and their interactions with the world. As potions become more complicated, instructions won't do much good, as skill with recognizing where adjustments need to be made become far more important. Admittedly, the majority of the early work comes not from the brewing, but from writing essays on the various materials common to potions."

Harry made a face at the mention of essays, as he considered it nothing more than busy work, prompting an understanding grin from Nicolas.

"I know the essay aspect seems rather pointless, but it will get you more familiar with the properties and nuances of ingredients, which is hugely important."

Harry sighed dramatically.

"I guess that makes sense, as painful as it sounds. What else are potions good for, besides medicine?"

At his question, Nicolas' eyes developed an excited shine to them.

"The usefulness of potions is practically limitless. Aside from the vast array of medicinal uses, there is a potion that allows for the user to take the shape of any person, called Polyjuice. Strengthening solutions make objects far more resistant to damage. Explosive and corrosive potions have long been used in battle. There is a potion, Felix Felicis, which makes the user extremely lucky for a period of time. Harry, there is even a potion that can prevent death."

Harry couldn't help but find himself impressed, the potential use for them being far more expansive than he had originally thought.

"I have been experimenting with potions for a very, very long time, and I still have not reached the point where there is nothing left to discover, or where I have grown bored with them. There is always something new to discover, to unearth. So, have I convinced you of the usefulness of potions, Harry?"

He let out a small laugh. Nicolas' enthusiasm for the subject had been evident, and somewhat contagious. However, he was more curious about the other topics covered at Hogwarts.

"Yeah, it sounds like it could be really useful. What other subjects are taught at Hogwarts?"

"Well, first years, as you will be next year, only have eight classes to worry about."

Nicolas held out one finger.

"Well, first off is a class called Potions. Have I mentioned that one yet?"

Harry let out a wide grin at his statement.

"Yeah, I think you said a few words about it."

"Excellent," Nicolas replied, holding out another finger, "there is Transfiguration, which is the practice of turning one object into another. It probably is the most magically intensive subject at Hogwarts, very challenging, requiring a high level of concentration and will. However, it is extremely valuable, well worth learning."

"Third, is History of Magic. While the professor...is..." he trailed off, struggling to find the right words.

Harry had an inkling that Nicolas wasn't exactly fond of the professor, whoever it was.

"Well, Harry, I see no reason to be discrete with you. Quite frankly, the professor is absolutely terrible. The material is useful, especially to someone like yourself, still relatively new to the Wizarding world, but its presentation leaves, much, much to be desired."

Harry nodded. He had found that, taken as a whole, interest in material was directly proportional to the teacher's presentation.

Nicolas leaned forward, and his voice adopted a conspiratorial whisper.

"Please do not tell Perenelle, but we have a fine library at our estate. I can recommend you a few books, just read those and you will never have to pay attention in class."

Harry chuckled, quite fond of the idea.

"Next is Charms, which is the practice of using spells that affects how an object corresponds to the world."

Following the statement, Nicolas was silent for a second.

"That was an absolutely horrible explanation, was it not?"

Harry laughed in agreement, prompting a slightly embarrassed smile from Nicolas.

"Well, Charms is rather difficult to categorize, as at many points it intersects with Defense Against the Dark Arts. In both classes you use spells, but the Defense class will mostly deal with spells that have very clear offensive or defensive applications, while Charms would teach a student spells that would affect objects, like how to make them float, or how to make them lighter or heavier. Does that make more sense?"

Harry nodded.

"It was a lot better than the first one. What's Defense Against the Dark Arts?"

He stuck out his thumb, leaving him without any spare fingers on the hand.

"Defense Against the Dark Arts is a topic even broader than that of Charms. Usually, the material is entirely at the discretion of the professor, who...as of late, seems to change with alarming regularity. Nonetheless, in general it deals with, as stated before, offensive and defensive spells. It also deals with Dark creatures, and a variety of other topics."

Harry found himself intrigued. It certainly didn't appear that Hogwarts taught the Dark Arts. What were they really?

"Sir, what exactly is the Dark Arts?"

Nicolas was silent for a second, which led Harry to believe he was choosing his words carefully.

"With regards to the magic in general, there is a spectrum. Most spells are neutrally aligned, bearing no allegiance to either Dark or Light. However, the Dark Arts are something entirely different."

Harry leaned forward. He couldn't explain it, but as interesting as he found Nicolas' explanation of Hogwarts, this intrigued him deeper.

"The Dark Arts are based entirely upon the foundation of sacrifice. To use the Dark Arts, there must be some sort of sacrifice involved. The Dark Arts can only exist through death. However, this death need not be literal, in any sense. There are a great many witches and wizards, throughout history, who have used the Dark Arts and lived virtuous lives. Their sacrifices have been minor, for instance, one wizard underwent a ritual that destroyed his ability to father children, but he gained something in return."

"Everything has its price," Harry whispered, more to himself than anything. He remembered hearing it somewhere, but couldn't remember where.

"Indeed it does, Harry," Nicolas agreed solemnly, "but often, the price is too high. For some people, this is unimportant, which is why the Dark Arts are often so feared. Some people in this world, Harry, have no limits, no morals. They care not the price, and will go to any length to accomplish their goals."

Harry was struck by the thought of the evil reptile-shaped man who tried to destroy his mind, and how murder seemed so trivial to him.

"Like Voldemort?" Harry asked, quite sure of the answer.

"Just like him, Harry," Nicolas states gravely, "he was about as evil as a Wizard could ever become, possibly the most vile Dark Lord in recorded history. Luckily, we had our own weapon against him..."

"Dumbledore?" Harry asked.

Nicolas favored him with a small smile.

"Exactly. As Dark, and as evil as Voldemort was, Dumbledore was his complete opposite, a Lord of the Light. Without him, the Wizarding world would have fallen into darkness. As the Dark can only exist with death, the Light can only exist with life, with purity. Those who have sacrificed a part of themselves for the Dark, will find that the Light will forever elude them."

Quite a bit more complicated than the muggle world.

"So, it's either one or the other?"

"Correct. The Flamels, themselves, have long been a family dedicated to the Light, as have the Dumbledores. Hogwarts really only acknowledges the Dark Arts as something to be avoided by an adolescent. Obviously, it's a large decision, one that as a society, in general, it is believed can only be made once a person has matured to a certain degree."

Harry thought for a second, wondering if he should ask the question on his mind, before throwing caution to the wind.

"Do you mind if I ask what made you stick to the family tradition?"

Nicolas shook his head.

"Not at all. As a wizard, I can command magic to do as I please. Without magic, I am not a wizard, so it's an equal relationship, with no part having clear control over the other. When using Light magic, I believe that this relationship is maintained. However, with the Dark...I may be slightly biased, but it seems to disrupt that relationship. When one has to make sacrifices to gain power, it seems to be a process of becoming a slave to magic, as the Dark has been known to corrupt."

He thought a second, before continuing.

"I do want to stress, Harry, that not everyone who uses Dark magic is evil. Far from it. You will find good people who use it, and find evil within those dedicated to the Light."

Harry nodded, starting to get a better grasp at how some of the pillars of Wizarding society functioned.

"Thanks for sharing that with me, sir. I know it was rather personal."

Nicolas waved it off.

"I am both proud and certain of my choices, so I have nothing to hide. Do you want to know anything else about the Dark Arts?"

There was a great deal more Harry wanted to learn about the subject, but figured he had been indulged enough for one day. If the library was expansive as he had been led to believe, he could probably find all he wanted within it.

"No, you told me all I wanted to know. Is that it for classes, or are you going to have start using your other hand to count?"

The older man chuckled slightly at his statement.

"I think that I will manage. The next one is Astronomy. I do not find it particularly useful, and cannot think of a lot of uses for it. Between you and me, I find it completely pointless."

Harry found himself agreeing. Astronomy was fine as a hobby for some people, but he really didn't know why it needed to be taught.

"There is also Herbology, which is my wife's specialty. I am sure she would be more than willing to show you a thing or two within her greenhouse."

Harry found it odd, that one of the classes was essentially gardening.

"It is useful at all, sir?" Harry asked, not really speaking his true thoughts on the matter.

"Yes, I would say so", Nicolas replied, "at the very least with its link to Potions. Working with plants, you learn a lot about their properties, which is a huge help with regards to Potions."

He supposed that made sense.

"It does sound kind of useful, now that you mention it."

"Correct you are, Harry. Lastly, is Ethics. It's a relatively new course that..." He trailed off, with a look of disgust on his face, similar to the one he wore while reading the paper during breakfast.

"Harry...tradition is an important thing. It preserves the order, the cultures of our world. Naturally, new ideas are going to occur as civilizations grow, but from necessity, not for progress's sake."

His eyes looked as though they were far away, as if his mind has been transported to another place, one that he hid deep within himself.

"I...I do not understand the world anymore. The natural order of the world, is that actions change the world, words and appearances are just those. But this new world, Harry, cares not for actions. It cares for appearances, for illusions. Everyone agrees that these new ideas will not work, are doomed to fail, but no one is willing to do anything about it. We edit our speech, tip-toe around one-another, and to what end, Harry?"

Harry certainly didn't have an answer, as he didn't even know what Nicolas was talking about. As if sensing Harry's unease, he shook his head, casting aside the cobwebs.

"Forgive me Harry, I'm old, and liable to occasionally branch out into tangents that do not concern you. The important thing, is that Hogwarts, a school which has stood with an established system for close to a thousand years, is facing direct interference from the Ministry, the Wizarding government."

"That doesn't sound right," Harry said, "isn't it the teachers who should have the final say?"

"It is, but that's only the root of the problem. The Ministry is looking to push its politics upon young, impressionable minds, which is absolutely beyond reproach. For a thousand years, Hogwarts first-year did fine with seven core classes. Now, though, apparently that's

not good enough, the Ministry has to push its propaganda upon the young. "

He wondered if it was a biased opinion that met his ears or something closer to the truth.

"You don't have to worry about me, sir. I try to question everything that I'm taught. They won't be able to brainwash me!"

The tired look in Nicolas' eyes faded as he laughed.

"No, I suppose not. Shall we move back to far more pleasant topics, such as Potions?"

"Yeah, definitely."

"Most excellent. I think I am going to start you off with a simple Potion, which is often the first one taught at Hogwarts. Some might say I'm giving you an unfair advantage, but I just say that I am giving an under-privileged child a chance to succeed. Sound good to you?" Nicolas finished, a sly smile upon his face.

Harry nodded enthusiastically. He had absolutely no qualms about getting a head start, and learning to actually do things commonplace to the Wizarding world.

Nicolas turned behind him, to a small bookshelf located next to the chalkboard. He searched for only a moment before pulling out a thick volume, and placing it on the table next to Harry.

"This, Harry, is 'Magical Drafts and Potions' by Arsenius Jigger. While a great many of the introduction-level Hogwarts texts are of poor quality, this is an exception. You will not find a finer textbook for beginner Potions. Would you kindly open the book to page twenty, and tell me which potion is described?"

Harry flipped through the thick tome, noticing that the pages appeared to be simultaneously smooth, but stuck to his finger while flipping, making page turning a breeze.

I guess it's the best of both worlds here in the Wizarding world.

"It says 'The Boil Cure Potion'."

"Correct you are, Harry. While its usage is quite evident by the name, it is a simple potion, with a relatively low amount of variables involved, which makes it ideal for our purposes. Tell me, what are the ingredients needed?"

The information was listed, right below the caption at the top of the page, and they looked very unpleasant.

"Dried nettles, crushed fangs, stewed horned slugs and porcupine quills. Do you have all of these...things?"

Nicolas chuckled lightly.

"Why, indeed I do. Follow me to the storeroom, and the bounty of the Boil Cure Potion shall be yours!"

Groaning slightly, he obediently jumped off the stool, and followed the Potions Master to the storeroom.

He couldn't help but feel that the next part would be rather unpleasant.

Stewed horned slugs?

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Within a few hours time, Harry found himself back in the Flamels' kitchen, gorging himself on sandwiches that the house-elf had so generously provided.

"So, Harry," Perenelle began, "what do you think of my husband's obsession?"

Harry had to admit that he did find himself fascinated with the subject. The subtleties, the small, delicate details that made the difference between perfection and disaster. There was something calming, relaxing about focusing solely on the brewing process, that let the rest of the world just fall away.

"I like it a lot. I thought it would be like schoolwork, but I like doing magical stuff."

Perenelle turned to her husband, a stern look upon her face, mouth pressed into a straight line.

"Well, my dearest husband, are you happy with yourself? You have converted yet another innocent soul to your particular brand of madness."

Nicolas, not looking all that chastised, let out a wide smile.

"Milady, I could not be more pleased."

Her façade broke at his statement, leaving the three members of the table wearing matching grins.

Just before Harry could break in with his own retort, the flurry of wings stilled his tongue. In a whirlwind of movement, a tawny owl swooped through the window, and deftly dropped a letter upon the table. It hooted once, before taking off again, out the window it had came.

The envelope left behind was completely bereft of name, prompting Harry to ask who it was from.

"I am not sure." Nicolas answered, picking up the letter and opening it. Upon unfolding it, he spoke two words.

"Dumbledore's reply."

Harry froze at the words. While he wanted to meet the man and personally thank him for all that he did, he was also apprehensive, and slightly frightened. What do you say to the man that you tried to kill?

Perenelle, sensing his unease, covered his hand with her own, and gave it a light squeeze. She regarded him with a small, sad smile.

"Harry, don't worry," Perenelle began, "Dumbledore knows that it was not you who fought against him, but Voldemort. He holds you in very high regard for holding out against Voldemort for so long."

Harry nodded in response, slightly uncomfortable with the contact. He didn't know why, it was a caring gesture, but it uneased him for some reason. However, he didn't want to make Perenelle feel as if

the gesture was unappreciated, so he plastered a fake smile upon his face.

"Thank you."

Thankfully, she released his hand at his reaction, and glanced at her husband, who was absorbed in the letter.

"What does Dumbledore have to say?"

Nicolas held up one finger, asking for another minute without looking up from the letter.

She looked rather incensed at his lack of real reply, but held her tongue, and kept her expression neutral. As the seconds wore on, he began to fidget, even though it was a childish action he felt beneath him. Why was the letter taking so long?

After what seemed like an hour to Harry, Nicolas folded the letter and handed it to his wife. He was silent for a second, and rubbed his temple slightly, before turning to Harry and addressing him.

"Harry, if you think you are ready for it, Dumbledore would like to meet you tonight, at six o'clock. Are you ready for this?"

He was silent for a second, but there really wasn't much of a choice. There was a great deal of trepidation within his mind, but he squashed it mercilessly. Now was not the time to be skittish.

"If you think this is too soon to confront, then that is also perfectly alright." Nicolas added, taking his momentary silence for indecision.

Harry shook his head in response. "No, I want to meet him tonight, to thank him personally."

Nicolas nodded, then followed up, rather hesitantly.

"Dumbledore, because of the...rather unique situation the two of you experienced, he says that there are things about that day that you would prefer not to get out, and asked if it was possible that the initial meeting only be between the two of you. Are you comfortable with that?"

Harry was relieved that Dumbledore had suggested it. He wasn't exactly comfortable with the details of their first encounter, and certainly didn't want them getting out. While he was beginning to trust the Flamels, the idea of anyone knowing what occurred that day was simply unacceptable.

"Yeah, that's actually how I want it. So far, I trust you two, but..." Harry trailed off, not really knowing how to finish the statement in a delicate manner.

"Harry, it is perfectly alright," Perenelle reassured, "I understand that the events, while totally out of your hands, still make you feel ashamed. If I were in your position, I would like as few people to know as possible too."

Her statement prompted Harry to give her a grateful smile. He was glad that the Flamels could at least understand where he was coming from on the issue.

The next minute was spent in silence, with Nicolas apparently deep in thought, Perenelle reading, and Harry munching on his sandwiches, in thought as well.

If all the letter had was Dumbledore's request for a private meeting, and a time, then why was it so long?

"Dumbledore cannot serious!" Perenelle exclaimed from nowhere, breaking Harry from his reverie.

"I'm afraid he is, dear," Nicolas solemnly spoke, "but think about it deeply. Can you see the potential benefit?"

"I..." Perenelle faltered for a moment, before finding the proper retort, "is that not a bit too much right now?"

"It might be, it will be up to him to decide."

Both of the Flamels turned to Harry, who had been following the exchange closely. Obviously it had been in Dumbledore's letter, concerning him, but other than that he hadn't a clue.

"Harry," Nicolas began, "We're both sorry to speak of you as if you are not here."

Perenelle nodded vigorously, echoing his sentiment.

"Dumbledore has suggested something, that while rather outlandish, might be a good idea. Sadly, he alone wants to inform you, and he asked us not to tell you anything."

Harry fumed for a moment, put out.

Why are they holding back information? If it's about me, shouldn't I have a right to know?

"Harry, we're very sorry for the secrecy," Perenelle apologized, "but you will find out exactly what is going on later tonight. We promise."

His sudden anger drained away at her words. They didn't really like the secrecy either, but apparently Dumbledore had asked for it.

I could still pout, but it wouldn't do any good. I'm not a child anymore, and will not act like one.

"It's okay," Harry assured, "if I'm finding out tonight anyway."

"Thank you for being so understanding, Harry," Perenelle thanked, "most people your age wouldn't have the maturity to handle this situation the way you just did."

He let out a small smile at her compliment.

"I just try to act my age, not younger."

"The effort is appreciated, Harry. Once we're done with lunch, would you care to see my greenhouse? There are some fairly exciting plants within it, and I do stock a good portion of the materials used for my dear husband's obsession."

Harry really didn't care about it, but certainly acknowledged that it would be a good idea to do something, anything to get his mind off tonight's impending meeting.

"Yeah, I'd definitely like to."

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

As the shadows began to lengthen, Harry sat within one of the sitting rooms, not far from his room. He had originally thought that the guest wing of the house had only extended to lodging, but on that front he had been wrong.

This room had a large window, which took up half of the far wall, giving an almost perfect view of the slowly descending sun. He gazed at the large, bright orb, seated within a plush leather armchair.

There was a clock on the wall behind him, but by sheer force of will, he had turned his back to it. He was well aware that six o'clock may have come sometime early next century if he had watched the time pass.

Reflecting, he found the day; by far to be one of the more enjoyable ones he could remember occurring. He had been surprised to find himself quickly infected by Perenelle's enthusiasm for Herbology. He wasn't a huge fan of playing around in the dirt, but he found dealing with plants to be calming, even if it was only relatively calm plants he was dealing with.

The sheer variety of plants that inhabited the greenhouse was mind-boggling to him. Some of them even seemed more like animals than plants, especially that Venomous Tentacula, which seemed to almost have the disposition of a chastised puppy when shooed by Perenelle.

Any luck with trying to distract yourself from Dumbledore?

Harry sighed deeply. He had been recounting the day in his head for what seemed like a while now, anything to push the doubt away. With all he had heard of Dumbledore, and seen himself, it was obvious that the man was a genius, of deep intellect, someone who couldn't be easily deceived.

How is there any way he's not going to know I'm lying?

He didn't know, but it wasn't going to stop him from trying. He had fought too hard to keep his secrets and he wasn't going to give them up without a fight.

A light knocking up the door tore him from his thoughts.

Well, I guess its show time.

He rose from the chair, his hands trembling in anticipation. Before he took a step, he closed his eyes, and forced his apprehension away, willing himself to remain calm. It fortunately worked, and his next step was cool, collected, without tremor.

He crossed the short distance to the doorway, and opened it.

Dumbledore stood outside the room, adorned in dark purple robes, a grandfatherly smile upon his withered face.

"Harry, I'm very pleased to see you up and about. Having never had an opportunity to do so during our previous meeting, allow me to introduce myself as Albus Dumbldore."

Struck by a sudden sense of the surreal, he slowly shook hands with his benefactor.

"Pleased to meet you sir, I'm Harry Potter."

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled at the introduction.

"The pleasure is entirely mine, my boy. Would you care to take a seat?"

Harry did so, sitting back into the leather armchair that still bore the slightest of creases from his earlier visitation to it. Dumbledore took the seat next to him, which was a similar armchair, except blue as opposed to the green one he sat in.

"Before I say anything else, Harry, I need to apologize for not being here for your recovery. Sadly, the demands of my profession have become very time-consuming as of late."

Dumbledore's eyes grew a hard sheen when talking about the demands of his job, but it was gone so quickly that Harry wasn't sure if he had imagined it or not.

"It's not a big deal, sir. I wasn't really conscious for any of it, so it didn't really matter."

"Well, at the very least I'm glad that you don't hold any ill will against me for neglecting you."

"Are you serious!" Harry exclaimed, "how could I hold a grudge against the person that helped me break free from Voldemort? If you never came, I would never have got the chance to escape."

Dumbledore inclined his head slightly.

"A reasonable point, Harry, but you're to thank just as much. If you hadn't have held out so long against him, which is a feat that many older, accomplished wizards have failed at, I never would have had the opportunity to help."

Oh shit. Here it comes.

He had hoped the topic of how he kept Voldemort from taking over his mind could be kept secret for a little while longer, but Dumbledore was edging dangerously close to it.

"Yes, sir, I guess you're right. Anyway, thanks again for helping me. I've wanted to say that to you ever since I woke up."

"Yes, the Flamels had mentioned that, and you are very welcome, Harry. How has your time been with the Flamels, to date?"

"It's been nice. The Flamels have been kind to me, and teaching me all about the Wizarding world."

Dumbledore laughed heartily.

"Am I to assume that Nicolas has tried to infect you with his love for Potions?"

Harry grinned at the statement.

"Yeah, he has. I actually like potions, doing something that's magical. It makes me feel like a part of this world."

"That's very good to hear, Harry. Did you have any knowledge of magic before you came to the orphanage in London?"

Harry froze, though managed to keep his facial expression neutral. Should he lie here?

"No, I'm afraid not, sir. The first time I learned of magic was when I first saw what Voldemort was doing."

Dumbledore nodded at the statement, looking slightly grave.

"So it must have been even greater of a shock to you, then. How exactly were you aware of your surroundings, Harry? From my research, it appears that most of the time, the person being possessed won't have any memories once they wake up. Do you have any idea why this didn't happen to you?"

Thinking fast, Harry lowered his voice, and replied.

"I'm not sure, sir. When I first awoke, it was like I was behind someone else's eyes. I knew that if I...well, came forward, I might be able to take control, but I wasn't sure. During the fight, I didn't know what type of stuff he had hidden to use against you. I waited until I was sure that he had nothing left to use, since I thought I was going to get one shot at taking back control."

Dumbledore appeared clearly impressed with his actions.

"Again, I must congratulate you, Harry. Had you come forward too soon, there's a good chance you would have never had another opportunity. Well done."

"Thank you, sir."

"I'll admit, Harry, that I had been searching for you for almost ten years, but was unable to find you. Imagine my surprise when you turn up at a muggle orphanage, my boy! All of my previous methods of finding you had failed, which is surprising, since a specific child should usually be fairly easy to find."

"That is strange," Harry replied, injecting some confusion into his voice, "Do you have any idea what happened?"

"I have a few ideas, but certainly no concrete conclusions," Dumbledore stated sadly, "but I'm very confident of one thing."

Harry began to get very nervous. He didn't like where this was going, nor the silence that stretched out the statement. After about twenty seconds, he broke it.

"What's that?"

"Well, there isn't a great deal of ways to hide one's self, especially when an owl is sent with a letter addressed to a particular person. You see, owls have a keen magical sense of tracking people, which is beyond the measure of all other creatures. The only way to prevent an owl from finding you is to block your magical signature, which is not easy, and only possible through either powerful amulets, or wards."

Harry was silent at the direction of Dumbledore's conversation. Really, what could he say at this point?

"So, Harry, I ask you, is there anything that you're not telling me about your past?"

With a loud sigh, Harry laid his head low. While he thought he was being careful, Dumbledore had clearly seen through his plans. He was in despair, his back completely against the wall. There was really only one rational path for him to take.

"Please forgive me, sir. I'm very sorry for lying to you. I know it's a poor way to repay what you've done for me, but...I just didn't want anyone else to know about where I came from."

At his words, the Headmaster's expression grew sorrowful.

"I understand, Harry. Please know that I knew that you were lying from the start. I just needed to determine whether a piece of Voldemort was still controlling you, or whether there was some other explanation."

To think, Harry thought he had been so clever.

"Really? How?"

"In our fight at the orphanage, Voldemort used banishers, cutters, conjuration, transfiguration, physical shields and healing spells. Do you know how a person's magical core works, Harry?"

He shook his head in response.

"A magical core is the magical organ that grants all magic users their affinity. Though it's magical, it does have some similarities to human organs. More than anything, it's like muscle, but with a vastly greater growth ceiling. There's a reason why young children can't cast powerful spells; it's not physically possible. The magical core isn't developed enough to support the creation of such a spell."

The truth was evident to Harry.

"Even if Voldemort was possessing me, all that he would have access to would be my magical core. If it was small and undeveloped, he wouldn't have been able to use any spells."

Dumbledore nodded in response.

"Correct. With the spells Voldemort was using through you, it would have required at least a few years of regular magical use. So I ask you, Harry, where were you before the orphanage?"

Harry remained silent, still loathe to part with his secret, which in turn caused Dumbledore's expression to grow somber.

"Harry, anything that you tell me will be kept in the strictest confidence. Whatever happened, I'm not here to judge you, only to get a perspective on why a ten-year old child is equal to that of a fourteen year-old Hogwarts student."

Dumbledore's words assured him.

The question is though, will he believe you?

"Sir, I don't have the faintest idea."

Dumbledore didn't have any outward reaction to his words, but Harry felt that he had disappointed the man in some sense. In hopes of explaining himself, he rushed on.

"My first memories are of wandering the side of the road, in scorched clothes. A cop picked me up, then eventually I was placed

in the orphanage. I was silent, didn't talk to anyone, because...well...back then I un-understood my past."

His voice hitched slightly, a consequence of the immense frustration he felt.

This isn't fucking fair! Why did I have to lose my memories?

"Harry, please," Dumbledore said, putting a hand on his shoulder, "take as much time as you need."

Get yourself under control, Harry! You're not some fucking sniveling little kid!

"I don't understand why anymore, but the inside of my mind...it's an actual place, a house in the middle a forest. I assume that inside my head, was very important, or dangerous, or both, information. There was a clear shield around my mind, that protected me from Voldemort getting in. If I ever tried to take control of my body, I'd have to break the shield, and let Voldemort in to do it."

He stopped for a moment, trying to figure out how to explain it. Much of it was still confusing to him. Dumbledore squeezed his shoulder again with his long, gnarled fingers, before letting go and giving him a nod of encouragement.

"I decided to sacrifice my past, everything, to possibly escape. In the basement is a large, steel vault. I don't understand how anymore, but I somehow locked my entire past within it...and I don't know the combination. I searched every fucking inch of that area, but I never found a single clue about the combination."

Harry immediately regretted lapsing into such casual and rude speech in front of Dumbledore, and opened his mouth to apologize, but Dumbledore waved him off.

"Thank you for the courtesy, but emotion often colors our words without our forethought. Don't concern yourself about the slip."

Harry nodded graciously, as Dumbledore appeared to settle into thought, staring at him with a mixture of sadness, and something else Harry was at a loss to describe. After about thirty seconds, the Headmaster broke the silence.

"Harry," Dumbledore began, "that was a hugely, incredibly brave thing to do. To sacrifice so much...Harry, you've erased all my doubts regarding you, but why didn't you tell us? We could have helped."

There it was, the heart of the matter.

"Sir, if it ever got out I didn't have a past, the Flamels probably would have brought in mental experts, and they probably would have cracked the safe."

"I assume you don't want this, since the secrets within would be exposed?" Dumbledore questioned gently.

Harry nodded.

"That's a part of it, but I also have to believe in myself. I don't know my past, but I think I have a good idea about myself, and I don't think that I would sacrifice my entire past for no good reason."

"I understand, Harry," Dumbledore said, head bowed, "but I want you to think about letting me help you. I would be willing to take a magical oath which would swear me to complete secrecy. At least give it some thought."

Harry nodded, at least resigning himself to think about it. It would be rather nice to have this burden shared, and to have a powerful wizard take a look at the situation.

"Thank you for keeping an open mind. There is one other thing that I want to speak to you about. How much do you remember about the ring?"

Harry didn't need clarification about which ring. That was clear as day.

"Everything, every detail. It haunted me for a long time inside my mind. It's a nightmare. Why do you ask?"

"Well, Harry, how would you feel about bearing witness to its destruction?"

Harry found himself shocked. The ring was still around?

"Sir, why haven't you destroyed it, before it catches someone else!"

"Harry, I certainly appreciate your concern, but I currently have it magically bound, so that it can't harm anyone. I almost did destroy it immediately, but thought it might be therapeutic for you to see the evil artifact destroyed."

Oddly enough, Harry felt himself touched by the gesture. However safe Dumbledore considered the ring, he had to know there was a chance that things could always go wrong. Dumbledore had risked all of that, just to make sure that he had some sort of closure with the evil artifact. His answer was evident.

"I wouldn't miss it for anything."

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

The fear, the terror, the avalanche of emotion he expected upon seeing the object that had possessed him, never arrived. It was controlled, and couldn't harm him. He was safe. It probably also helped that Nicolas and Dumbledore had been joking around most of the night, robbing the Horcrux of its one final chance to inspire fear.

The ring lay at the bottom of a clear glass cylinder, with a diameter of only a few inches. Directly on top of the cylinder was a basin coated with the fluorescent green of dragon mucus, which held within it basilisk venom. All of this was contained within a much larger box, with sides six feet long.

"Did we really have to use dragon mucus?" Harry muttered, still mildly traumatized by having to coat the basin with the thick, incredibly sticky substance.

"Indeed we did, my budding apprentice," Nicolas spoke cheerfully, "it is one of the few substances in the world that will hold up against the potent acids contained within basilisk venom."

Dumbledore looked up from his intent staring contest with the ring.

"Nicolas, how were you able to synthesize basilisk venom so quickly? I know you're incredibly skilled, but this is even a miracle even for you."

Nicolas let out a long chuckle at Dumbledore's compliment.

"Thank you for the kind words, Dumbledore, but when did I ever say I would need to actually synthesize it?"

Surprise found its way onto Dumbledore's face, something which looked alien on it.

"How, Nicolas? There hasn't been a single basilisk seen for over five-hundred years..." He trailed off as the solution struck him, which ended in a laugh.

"Well played, Nicolas."

"Why thank you," Nicolas replied, bowing down low.

Harry found himself confused by the exchange. Were they implying that Nicolas was over five-hundred years old? Surely that was impossible.

Perenelle, starting to look slightly annoyed by the somewhat blasé atmosphere, spoke up.

"Are we completely sure this is safe?" Perenelle asked, looking around the damp, cold wine cellar with suspicion.

"I assure you, milady," Dumbledore began, "that this glass is of a special design, one I and your husband designed ourselves."

"That doesn't exactly fill me with confidence," Perenelle whispered balefully, stealing a glance at her husband, who was examining the ring's container from the other side.

Harry let out a small snicker at her snide comment, unable to hide it.

Perenelle glanced in his direction, a small, sad smile upon her face.

"Are you sure you want to watch this, Harry? I would hate for you to have to relive any of those horrible moments spent under control of the ring. Who knows what evil it might attempt to escape?"

He shook his head defiantly, unwilling to yield on the subject, despite her arguments to the contrary.

"Thanks again for your concern, but I truly need to see this, to know once and for all that Voldemort won't ever be able to harm anyone again."

She nodded, biting her lip slightly. He knew she wasn't going to relent on her opinion, but respected her enough to not try to prevent him from seeing this.

"All right," Nicolas exclaimed suddenly, "everything should be all set."

"Should be?" Perenelle asked maliciously, "That is not exactly the word I want to hear when we are dealing with a piece of Voldemort's soul!"

Nicolas strode up to his wife, and grasped her hand lightly.

"We are taking this very seriously, my dear, I assure you. Both Dumbledore and I have figured out what we believe to be a foolproof way to dispose of the ring. If the situation starts to go sideways, well, I like our centuries of experience against that ring. Whatever happens, it is never going to hurt Harry again."

Perenelle squeezed her husband's hand one more time, before letting go.

"Could you go over the plan one final time?"

Harry's ears perked up at her request. He knew it by heart by now, but found himself wanting to hear it again, one final time.

"Of course. When I say so, our good friend Albus is going to summon the stopper which is holding the basilisk venom within the basin. He'll cancel the summoning once the cork has exited the basin. By that point, the venom will have flowed into the cylinder, completely filling it, and thus submerging the ring completely."

Nicolas paused for a moment, savoring the thought, before continuing.

"Then it is going to be farewell to this piece of Voldemort's soul."

This piece?

"Sir, what do you mean by this piece?"

Dumbledore raised his hand, wanting to field the question himself.

"Harry, remember when I explained to you the basics of the Horcrux?"

Harry nodded in response. It had only been about an hour ago, where he had learned that Voldemort had encased a portion of his soul within the ring.

"The night he attempted to destroy you, his body was completely destroyed. With his Horcrux still intact, he would still have an anchor to this world. I believe that this most likely allowed for him to remain in spirit form, not unlike a poltergeist of some sort. In all probability, he may have possessed someone, just to regain physical form."

Harry felt far less comforted by the news. That meant that the real Voldemort was still out there, waiting for his time to strike. His body language wasn't lost upon Dumbledore, who sought to reassure him.

"Do not despair, Harry. We're doing a great thing tonight, robbing Voldemort of his most potent weapon, his immortality. We will find him one day, and on that day he will be outside the protection of his Horcrux."

Harry nodded at Dumbledore's words. He wasn't exactly reassured, but he felt somewhat better.

Dumbledore seemed satisfied by Harry's answer, and turned to Nicolas.

"I believe that we're now ready to begin. Any final preparations you'd like to make?"

"No, I am ready," Nicolas replied, shaking his head, "whenever you are ready."

At the confirmation, Dumbledore's eyes hardened, and became cold. It was in such stark contrast to his usual grandfatherly demeanor, similar to the look he wore while fighting Voldemort at the orphanage. With a single swift movement, he raised his wand aloft and pulled it back sharply, wordlessly summoning the stopper.

The stopper flew out of the basin, before dropping to the ground as Dumbledore cancelled the spell. The dam unbound, the silvery fluid dropped down into the cylinder, like a waterfall of poison.

The ring immediately began to change, shifting itself into different shapes in an entirely futile effort to save itself, surrounded by a slight green glow, which highlighted brightly against the rising tide of silver. However, the toxic venom was far stronger than the ring's conjured shield.

In a matter of seconds, the shield broke down, and began dissolving the gold metal. An unearthly shriek emitted from the dying Horcrux, a sound culled from the very depth of hell itself. The sound ran right through Harry's head, the soul fragment's hatred and fear becoming his own, as if he himself were dying beneath an ocean of toxins.

He clapped his hands over his ears, his head full of wasps. It was hard to concentrate on the surrounding world with such pain, but he saw that none of the other people had hands over their ears, leading him to briefly wonder why he was the only one in pain.

Just as he made the realization, the sound was abruptly cut off. He looked to his side, and noticed Dumbledore twirling his wand in complicated patterns, but the hatred within remained. Pushing it aside, he refocused his attention on the dying soul fragment.

Despite the basilisk venom submerging and destroying it, the ring again began to glow, this time with a dark green light. He leaned closer to get a better view, and without preamble, it exploded in a blinding flash of light.

Pain exploded in his eyes, and the world turned to pure white, his retinas burned by the blinding flash. Through his pain, he heard the loud crash of the leftover shrapnel impacting the outer protective box.

He braced himself for the incoming shrapnel, but felt no new pain. He only had time to consider that at least the outer glass worked, before the pain returned, back from the sabbatical the threat of shrapnel had granted.

He fell to his knees, clutching his face, trying to cradle his burned eyes. Hands were upon him immediately.

"Harry, don't worry, you'll be fine!"

Was he the only one who hadn't looked away in time?

Coherent thought slightly returned as the knowledge struck him that at least one other person had looked away. Despite the pain, there was one other pressing issue.

"Is the Horcrux gone!" Harry screamed, struggling to keep his mind clear from the fog of agony.

Warm, lined hands grasped his own, and Perenelle's voice spoke into his ear.

"Yes, Harry, it's gone. It will never hurt you again."

He heard her turn away from him with a rustle of fabric, and address the rest of the other two people there.

"Could someone please just stun him?" Perenelle yelled, clearly not wanting him to have to suffer any more.

His tense, taunt muscles slightly relaxed at the news. Voldemort's trump had been discarded.

However, Voldemort himself was still out there, and would probably not stop until it had found him.

And when that day arrived, he was going to be ready.

When darkness descended, he went to it willingly.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Author Notes:

First, let me apologize for this chapter taking so long. With no violence to fall back upon, I had to actually write a lot of dialogue, which moved forward, progress wise, with all the velocity of molasses flowing uphill.

This is the first part of the second arc, which will cover the pre-Hogwarts events. I think it will be three chapters, but time shall tell. Also, I think the next chapter will be up at the beginning of October, but once again, time shall tell.

Any comments, suggestion or criticisms would be deeply appreciated. I'll make an effort to answer every review I get.

Thanks to my co-conspirators, darklordmike and mira mirth, for their valuable assistance with plotting, characterization, continuity and grammar.

Thanks to my beta, Erzibeth-Malfoy, for her help with this mammoth chapter.

DLP Thanks:

The Lord of Chaos, Johnny Farrar, akatsn

Thanks for reading.

Interludium I: DMLE Report on the Somerset Incident

Confidential DMLE Documents Enclosed

Is Harry Potter alive?

Reported by Nigel Fortescue, Senior Reporter for Wizzarding Weekly

September 15, 1990

The abrupt ending to You-Know-Who's reign of terror and darkness has long been considered the greatest mystery of this century. Amidst the endless speculation, there have been precious few truths, merely rumor and assumption. On that fateful night, both Lily and James Potter lost their lives. One of their closest friends, Sirius Black, betrayed both Potters to "You-Know-Who", and then murdered their mutual friend Peter Pettigrew when confronted.

However, of most interest were the two other individuals involved. The most feared wand in the world, responsible for more death than most plagues, was found within the wreckage of the Potter ancestral residence. While You-Know-Who's body was never recovered, the Department of Magical Law Enforcement concluded that his body had been destroyed, leaving only his wand intact. The lack of further Death Eater activity seemed to support the DMLE's findings.

While it is unquestionable that there is a lack of closure with the fate of You-Know-Who, there is a complete shroud of mystery surrounding the sole heir to the Potter legacy.

Harry Potter.

The name itself is enough to send even the most reserved of citizens into long-winded tirades and theories on what possibly could have happened to the one year-old child. I must admit, I've been among the guilty. Exactly like most components to the mystery of Halloween of 1981, there has been a dearth of facts to even begin to build a case upon. All of the numerous sightings have all turned out to be either hoaxes or mistakes.

There theories are many, and we've all heard them before.

"The Potter sacrificed themselves in a explosion, to catch You-Know-Who! Harry Potter was born a Dark Lord, and used dark magic to kill his family, then You-Know-Who! Harry survived, and is now under the care of a prestigious English family, just waiting for his Hogwarts letter!"

However, it may be the truth that is strangest of all.

Has Harry Potter been living under our noses the entire time?

Roughly three weeks ago, there was a large contingent of Aurors and Muggle Relations agents dispatched to a muggle orphanage in downtown London. The official cause was uncontrolled accidental magic, which is hardly a cause important enough to warrant the skills of highly trained Ministry personnel. And if indeed there was a young muggleborn exhibiting powerful enough magic to summon half of the Ministry, then where is this wonder-child?

Don't bother asking the Ministry.

All queries have been casually tossed aside, with our government claiming that there never was such a child. When pressed regarding the source of this phantom accidental magic, "no comment" was the only reply.

Luckily, a friendly ear within St. Mungo's relayed to me a story of a young boy, perhaps ten years old, being rushed to protective custody to one of their private wards. My source only got a quick look, but claimed the boy had sustained heavy injuries, looked like he had been in a serious accident. Also, this mysterious child had black hair, but no other real distinguishing features.

Black hair, like that of James Potter. Accidental magic strong enough to summon half the Ministry, and to cause grievous injury to the young boy.

Could this have been the power that was enough to fell You-Know-Who?

If indeed the sole survivor of that fateful Halloween night has returned, we the people deserve to know. Enough with the secrecy, enough with the lies! This is a discovery that belongs to the people

of England, not some bureaucrat looking to use a child as a political tool.

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Ministry Discovers Harry Potter in Muggle Orphanage!

Special Report by Rita Skeeter, Award-Winning Daily Prophet Reporter

September 18, 1990

That's right, ladies and gentlemen! The Potter heir has been found!

In a press conference that shook the entire Wizarding world to its core, Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge, announced to a stunned crowd that Harry Potter had indeed been recovered from the Stonewall muggle orphanage.

Minister Fudge was slightly less than forthcoming with specific details regarding why the heir to a prominent family was found in the middle of muggle London, but is not without purpose. Cornelius Fudge, whose leadership has guided our country through dark times in the past, knows perfectly well where Harry is and why, but chose not to reveal it yet, in Harry's best interest. The Minister assured us that when the situation is more secure, he will have more details for us, as has often been the case within this newfound era of open Ministry relations.

According to the Ministry, an extremely large accidental magic incident was detected at the Stonewall orphanage, prompting a swift response from the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. There, it appears that Harry Potter was hurt by an outburst of accidental magic, and was transported to St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries.

The precise nature of young Harry's injuries, as well as the extent, has been closely guarded by the Ministry. Other than saying that he was being cared for in a private ward at St. Mungo's, no other information was forthcoming. They did, however, say that his injuries are not life-threatening, and that he would be capable of addressing the Ministry in short order.

This reporter could not have been more stunned if the Minister had announced that Amelia Bones had stepped down as head of the DMLE to pursue a career in modeling. The astonishment was echoed in those around me, the emotional responses ranging from elation all the way to fear. One woman who witnessed the miracle had tears in her eyes, and spoke of Harry Potter as a symbol of hope. If a small child could survive the wrath of You-Know-Who, she said, didn't that mean there was hope for everyone?

Others were far less optimistic in their outlooks.

"What if Harry Potter is a fledgling Dark Lord himself?" A man who wished to remain anonymous stated. "Any child who survived an encounter with You-Know-Who must have had some sort of Dark powers himself."

Though we may not like to entertain it, our anonymous wizard makes an interesting point. With the damage done to the Potter home, no normal child could have possibly emerged without grievous harm. We can only hope that the child who outlived You-Know-Who turns out to be a symbol of hope for the Wizarding world, as opposed to a harbinger of a new dark age.

There is also the troubling matter of the DMLE being directly involved with the proceedings. One cannot help but wonder whether they are the right Wizarding body to deal with this crisis. It's no secret that the Minister has had countless difficulties with the head of the DMLE, Amelia Bones, who has repeatedly sought to undermine the authority of the new created Muggle Relations branch of the Ministry. Should we be placing the trust of such a delicate matter in the hands of such a Ministry official with such a questionable background? We can only hope that young Harry Potter receives the best of care and remains firmly rooted in the Light.

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Where is Harry Potter?

An opinion by Tavia Lovegood, Chief Editor of The Quibbler

October 7, 1990

Surprise, surprise.

Yet another week has passed us by, and still there's no sign of Harry Potter. Most governments would be embarrassed by this sort of mistake, that is, promising the answer to one of the Wizarding world's biggest secrets as being imminent, before entering three weeks of media silence. In England, though?

It's just business as usual.

Is Harry Potter close to recovery? No comment. When will we be able to speak with young Harry? No comment. Do you at least have photographic evidence that he exists? No comment. Why didn't your puppet masters program a wider vocabulary in their slaves? No comment.

With our Ministry's penchant for dropping the ball in critical situations, however, none of us over here at the Quibbler are exactly shocked. In fact, this is exactly the type of behavior that the once proud people of England have become accustomed to. Given the current efficiency of the Ministry's bureaucracy, is there anyone out there who would trust them to watch over a cat, let alone a young child?

We all should have seen the signs. The Chudley Cannons would have a better chance of going undefeated than our Minister, the Corrupt Dwarf, passing up a photo opportunity with Harry Potter. Sad as it may seem, I can clearly picture the Corrupt Dwarf, his entourage of bumbling fools in tow, pushing Harry Potter's comatose body up and down Diagon Alley. All things considered, I'm beginning to doubt whether the Ministry ever actually had Harry Potter in their possession

Doesn't it seem rather convenient that as soon as the Wizarding Weekly article pops up, the Ministry rushes to make a statement? It almost seemed like the Ministry hadn't any idea that Harry Potter had even been at the Stonewall orphanage, and had scrambled to uncover any possible truth to the article. Judging by the amount of information the Ministry provided in their illuminating press conference, it appears that they weren't able to uncover much. Perhaps they were hedging their bets upon finding Harry Potter quickly. Perhaps wrackspurt infestation kills more brain cells than originally suspected (for more information of wrackspurts, have a look at my husband's fascinating article on page 5).

It was all too-clear what would have happened. Young Harry would have been paraded around by the Corrupt Dwarf like a toddler showing off his new toy to the rest of the nursery. He would have been raised aloft, used as a symbol of the Ministry's stranglehold over the darkness that always seems to be threatening our country. Then again, in this political climate, it seems something as minor as a drop in earwig sales is reason enough for a national emergency.

No, I'd rather like to imagine that the Ministry never had control of Harry and that some shining benefactor rescued him and took him away from the insanity of this country.

In case it went unnoticed by readers of the Daily Prophet, in the "article" written by Rita Skeeter, she mentioned an unnamed man who suggested that Harry Potter may indeed be a budding Dark Lord. Yes, a Dark Lord, at ten years old.

Just when you thought the bar could not be lowered any further, the Ministry throws in this little gem, as an afterthought. How Skeeter can continue to call herself a journalist is something I fail to understand. This is nothing but the Ministry propaganda machine speaking through the newspaper.

The Ministry wants a scapegoat, someone to place the blame on if they have indeed lost control of Harry Potter, which I'm certainly sure they have. My hypothesis is that a kind benefactor did indeed whisk Harry away from St. Mungo's, out of the clutches of the Ministry. The article was a threat of sorts, to bring back Harry or have him painted as the next Dark Lord. Once again, if you're not on the Ministry's payroll, or campaigning for them, you're against them.

People of England, the predictability of our Ministry would be amusing if not for the lengths they'd go to prove their righteousness. In the coming weeks and months, you're going to see articles trying to paint an innocent, ten year-old boy as the next You-Know-Who. I urge you all, please don't allow the Ministry to wield this type of power. When you start to hear about the budding Dark Lord, who is planning to take over the country in-between games of Exploding Snap, don't listen. Better yet, tell others, those that won't question the dubious "facts" presented by the media. Tell them not to let the lies of a corrupt establishment make a pariah of a boy that has already lost everything once in his short life.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

What Really Happened at Stonewall Orphanage?

Special Report by Bradford Belby, Wizinging Weekly reporter

November 1, 1990

Almost two months ago, Wizinging Weekly reported that Harry Potter had been found at Stonewall orphanage, deep within the heart of muggle London. Three days later, the Ministry released a statement, confirming what this publication had already written, but not bringing any new information to light.

The revelation that the Potter heir, the final remaining link to one of Britain's most prominent families, was still alive invigorated our society as a whole. People openly celebrated in the streets, jubilant at the unexpected news. Since the abrupt, mysterious end of the Wizinging war, there has been precious little to celebrate. The uncertainty that has draped this country has been like a cold, damp, cloudless night. Harry Potter was like the dawn of a new day, poking through the gloom, a symbol of hope.

Now, in the wake of two months of silence from both St. Mungo's and the Ministry, people have become restless. The looks of hope have faded, morphing into those of distrust, of skepticism, an unanswered question in their eyes.

Where is Harry Potter?

Tired of the run-around handed down by the Ministry, myself and other colleagues here at Wizinging Weekly decided to take matters into our own hands. We started scouring the halls of the Ministry, the Atrium, known haunts of Ministry employees. Wherever we went, it seemed to be the same story. No one ever had any comment, wouldn't talk to us, wouldn't even give us the time of day. After several days, we started to grow very frustrated. Wasn't there anyone within the Ministry that actually cared about Harry Potter?

On the fourth day, our luck changed. A member of the DMLE agreed to talk to us, provided we kept their identity secret. With our mission

to find out the truth behind Harry Potter, we agreed quickly. Sadly, we were unprepared for the horrible truth.

According to the DMLE operative, on August 27th, the tracking grid started going ballistic over a section of muggle London. The area had been confirmed as being a home to no magical children, so an incident of accidental magic would have been surprising. Still, mistakes happen, and accidental magic would have been the expected cause. However, that was not what the grid started charting.

Complex magical detonations, advanced level transfiguration, banishers, summoners, stunning spells, cutting curses, blasting curses and other powerful spells were all detected, but that paled in comparison to the most heinous spell of all.

Avada Kedavra, the killing curse, was cast multiple times within the room that Harry Potter had stayed in.

Needless to say, we were shocked when we heard the news, but wanted to hear more. Our informant continued, saying that a large contingent of Aurors was dispatched to the Stonewall orphanage, and rushed up to the room. The scene described inside was one of complete chaos: all furniture smashed to pieces, the room burned in many places as if it had been on fire, holes in the ceilings and floors, shrapnel gored into every surface.

However, there were no witches or wizards inside, only two recently Obliviated muggle children. No Harry Potter.

Oddly enough, it gets stranger. A week prior to the incident, an employee of the Muggleborn Education office stopped by, and submitted a report that there was no evidence of any muggleborn children within the orphanage. The employee who submitted the report?

Nymphodora Tonks. The very witch that broke into the Ministry and stole a few rare artifacts, and was somehow involved in the murder of respected Ministry official William Flint.

So, what really happened here?

Did Nymphodora Tonks attempt to hide the existence of Harry Potter, intending to come back and kill him? And if so, how was young Harry able to fight back? All the magic detected was far more complex than any ten year-old would know. For that matter, where did Harry escape to? Our reports have him as being at St. Mungo's for a short time, but where did he go? He certainly doesn't seem to be there anymore.

Sadly, all the answers we received just spawned far more questions. One thing is certain, however.

Harry, all of us here at Wizarding Weekly wish you the best.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Inside Harry Potter's Stay at St. Mungo's: What is Dumbledore Hiding from Us? Special Report by Rita Skeeter, Award-Winning Daily Prophet Reporter

November 15, 1990

Albus Dumbledore, Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards, Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, and current Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, has long been held up as the gold standard to the Wizarding world. From his defeat in 1945 of the Dark Lord Grindelwald, to his various exploits in alchemy with the reclusive Nicolas Flamel, his achievements are numerous. Sadly, though, it seems as if this once-great wizard has begun his fade from renown.

New reports from anonymous sources have surfaced, casting further doubt upon the actions of Albus Dumbledore, the so-called leader of the Light. According to an unnamed worker at St. Mungo's, on August 27th, a very harried-looking Albus Dumbledore stormed into the hospital, holding a boy in his arms. The boy looked to be about ten years-old, with black hair. Whoever the boy was, he was in very harsh shape. Blood from a broken nose grimed his face, and leaked from the corners of his mouth. There appeared to be various burns across his body, and one of his thumbs had been torn off.

Before the staff could react, Dumbledore was demanding access to one of St. Mungo's private wards, to which the staff complied, too fearful of an angry Light Lord to do anything else. Once within the

private ward, Dumbledore implied harm would come to anyone who spoke of the child that had been brought before them. Ordering them to help the child, he then took his leave.

Over the next week, the staff of the secret ward used the extent of their healing skills to work on the comatose child. Though his eyes twitched beneath his eyelids, and he occasionally let out blood-curdling screams, he never awoke. With mounting horror, the staff found that the young boy's injuries were even more extensive than originally anticipated. A large object had apparently hit him, impacting his chest cavity, doing massive damage to his internal organs. Had Dumbledore waited even an hour, it was a strong probability the child would have died.

At the end of the week, the boy's physical injuries had mostly healed. However, he still was within the grip of a coma, and still let out the occasional scream of terror. When Dumbledore returned at the end of the week, he proceeded to take the boy with him. The staff insisted upon him seeking treatment from the mental health staff of St. Mungo's, but Dumbledore declined, saying that he was beyond the help of their staff. Without further word, the helpless staff could only look on as Dumbledore scooped the child up in his arms, and left St. Mungo's.

At the conclusion of the anonymous worker's account, I sat for a moment, in stunned silence. As much as Dumbledore's actions of late have suggested a mind slipping into senility, kidnapping seemed a stretch for even him. After all, shouldn't a Light Lord have some sort of moral objection to kidnapping?

As reported right in this space by yours-truly, as well as countless other publications, Dumbledore has been increasingly at odds with the Wizarding world. All attempts to bring the proven effectiveness of our Ministry's progressive ideas to Hogwarts have been met with stiff resistance, and even occasional outright denial. In the face of rapidly declining performance in OWL and NEWT testing, Dumbledore has remained steadfast in his certainty that there is no need for reform, for change.

This hard-headed stubbornness, this complete denial in the face of fact, has not merely been limited to the school which he presides over. In the Wizengamot legislative sessions, the Ministry has faced almost constant criticism and resistance from Dumbledore, holding

up key legislation that stands in the way of progress for our fine nation. However, even this jaded reporter was shocked at the lengths Dumbledore would stoop to undermine the Ministry.

Just when one would have assumed this story couldn't have gotten any stranger, it does just that. When there are multiple people involved in a cover-up, it strongly suggests a conspiracy. It is no secret that there exists an alliance between Dumbledore and Amelia Bones. Considering that the Aurors under her command were the first ones on scene, it's not a stretch to suggest that there was some sort of cooperation between the two. Perhaps it's even possible that the Aurors, under the control of Director Bones, were ordered to let Dumbledore go.

Even more taxing on the mind, however, is why Dumbledore was there in the first place, and why Harry was in such terrible physical shape, as if he had just wandered out from battle. We know that wanted criminal, Nymphodora Tonks, visited there and failed to report to her superiors that a wizard resided within Stonewall Orphanage. Could Dumbledore, Tonks and Director Bones have all been working together? Towards what goal, you might ask?

We know that Harry Potter somehow survived an encounter with You-Know-Who, only the most feared Dark Lord in England's long history. We also know that there were multiple Unforgiveables cast by someone within the orphanage. As much as Dumbledore may have faded, casting such terrible curses seems a little much. So who does that leave?

Harry Potter.

What if Nymphodora discovered a Dark Lord in his infancy? Instead of going to her superiors, she goes to the only Light Lord she knows, Albus Dumbledore, warns him that there's a young Dark Lord at a muggle orphanage. Dumbledore, armed with this new knowledge, decides he's going to do something about it, and rushes off to confront Harry Potter, but not before getting the support of Director Bones and her Aurors.

This writer can hear your thoughts as she writes, "but Rita, didn't Dumbledore take Harry to St. Mungo's, to heal him?"

Indeed he did. As evidenced by the vast destruction at Stonewall orphanage, Harry put up quite the fight when confronted by Dumbledore, but ultimately lost. Dumbledore had to subdue him Harry, but killing him was not the goal. The Supreme Mugwump's penchant for giving people second chances is legendary. Dumbledore's goal would be to capture Harry, and attempt to lead him back to the Light. That would explain why Dumbledore insisted upon the no mental Healers, as he knew a mind consumed by the Dark beyond the scope of the St. Mungo's staff.

Even if Dumbledore's intentions were noble in nature, his actions were inexcusable. With his reckless plan, the life of a young wizard was put at severe risk. Judging the collateral damage around the room, there was a high probability of putting muggle children at risk. Are these the actions of a Light Lord?

This writer says absolutely not, that they are the actions of a Wizarding relic, who has lost all touch with reality, who thinks himself above the law. How many other lives will be put at risk before this madman is stopped?

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Exclusive Interview with Albus Dumbledore

Conducted by Tavia Lovegood, Chief Editor of the Quibbler

November 25, 1990

For years, Albus Dumbledore has been known to Wizarding society as a paragon of the Light. He defeated the Dark Wizard Grindelwald, and led the Light against the forces of You-Know-Who a mere ten years ago. After Rita Skeeter's explosive bit of journalism (and I use the term very loosely) last week, I thought it only fair that Dumbledore have a forum where he could defend himself from these wild accusations, and have his words were unhindered by any filter. To my immense surprise, he agreed.

I arrived first, at a room within the Leaky Cauldron. This would be my first personal experience with the Chief Warlock outside of my time at Hogwarts, so anxiety had a tight grip on me. He ended up arriving slightly late, apologizing for his tardiness. Dumbledore seemed to sense my discomfort, and made every effort to put me at

ease. I could not have asked for a more gracious host. We started off with general pleasantries and small talk, before jumping into the "official" part of the interview.

TL: If I may be so bold, sir, how would you answer those critics who claim that you are involved in a conspiracy with Director Bones, the Aurors and Nymphodora Tonks, with the ultimate goal of brainwashing Harry Potter?

AD: I was not. Miss Tonks asked to meet me, which I complied with. In the course of our meeting, she mentioned that she had discovered Harry Potter within a muggle orphanage.

I immediately rushed away, to see if this could possibly be true. When I arrived, I found that Harry Potter was indeed there, but he was under the thrall of the Imperius Curse, and not himself.

TL: Why did Nymphodora Tonks tell you instead of going to her superiors?

AD: Miss Tonks was only recently graduated from Hogwarts, and had a wide reputation as being one of the most cheerful and rambunctious souls to ever grace its halls. I believe that upon her first visit to Harry, whoever put Harry under the Imperius also put Miss Tonks under its thrall, and this compelled her to seek me out. I also strongly believe this explains her actions at the Ministry, as well as the actions of the muggleborn wizard Octavius Pepper, who is currently awaiting trial.

TL: How is Harry Potter right now?

AD: He's doing quite excellent right now. The process of extracting the influence of the Imperius was long and arduous, but he's now completely recovered.

TL: What made you decide to take him away from St. Mungo's?

AD: His physical injuries were vast, and the Healers of St. Mungo's are among the finest in the world. However, his mental damage was of a variety so obscure that he was beyond the help of their mental experts. I arranged for a type of alternate treatment, which worked splendidly.

TL: Why did you not return him to Ministry after his mental wounds had healed?

AD: Quite simply, Harry requested it. After his ordeal he wanted a safe, quiet place, so I suggested one, and Harry agreed.

TL: I can't blame you, as the Ministry probably would have taken credit for discovering Harry Potter, and turned him into its mascot. When do you think Harry will be able to rejoin the Wizarding world?

AD: That's a difficult thing to predict. Harry enjoys his current residence vastly, so he may stay there for a good deal of time. The only thing I can really say with any certainty is that when the next school year begins, Harry Potter will be there to start his first year.

TL: What would you say to those who claim that you've overstepped your bounds?

AD: I would ask them if they would be content to merely do nothing if they saw a young child in dire need of help. Simply stated, I saw a child in desperate need of assistance, and decided to intervene. If that is what is defined as overstepping my bounds, then it is a line I will never hesitate to cross.

TL: Is it true that both the Ministry and the Hogwarts Board of Governors threatened to strip you of your position at Hogwarts if you didn't give up the location of Harry Potter?

AD: Certain parties may have made empty threats in my direction, but there was no legal ground for them to stand upon, so I feel rather confident that my current position is not in any jeopardy.

TL: Could you please clarify that statement, sir? Why wouldn't they have a legal precedent?

AD: Before the tragic demise of Harry's parents, I was named as the executor of their will, if anything untimely was to occur. Sadly, James and Lily Potter did not survive to see the end of the Wizarding war. They granted the title of executor unto me, so I would be able to help make important choices for him, such as where he spends his years leading up to Hogwarts.

TL: Have you any final words to impart upon the people of England?

AD: I do. To all who read this interview, I realize that a great deal has been written about Harry Potter, but precious little of it has been based upon fact. This child has experienced horrible ordeals, far above and beyond what any ten year-old should have to face. Despite all the adversity, however, Harry remains a wonderful, vibrant young man. I would ask that he be given the same consideration and empathy one would have for their own children.

TL: Thank you for the interview, sir.

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Articles continue on, all the way to the tragic events that occurred at Hogwarts in late spring, 1991.

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Confidential DMLE Documents Enclosed

To: Amelia Bones, Director of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement

From: Terrence Higgs, Junior Auror

Date: January 12, 1997

Subject: Possible clues to Undesirable #1's location

Overview:

This report is a comprehensive analysis of all materials recovered from the site of an unregistered magical residence in the Somerset County. Most of the evidence was destroyed, with the attached scrapbook being one of the few exceptions, the contents of which are all articles pertaining to Undesirable #1's entry into the Wizarding society, roughly six years ago. We believe the scrapbook to be a memento of sorts, and think that the residence may have been used as a hideout for Undesirable #1. With the scarcity of leads on Undesirable #1's whereabouts, we recommend continuing our investigation into this matter. Enclosed is the full report on the incident.

Full Report:

On January 10, 1997, a small magical detonation was detected on the grid, in an area without any nearby magical residences. Upon further investigation, the location was determined to be an isolated forest within the boundaries of Somerset country. Due to the heavily taxed resources of the DMLE, and the relatively low threat level associated with the task, it was determined by Supervisor Yaxley that I would investigate the occurrence myself.

The explosion detected was consistent with neglected ward-schemes, which is a common nuisance for the DMLE. The reading was a bright flare of magical energy on the grid, which disappeared within several seconds. The intensity of the discharge covered a small area, which suggested a minor incident. With no subsequent magical readings in the immediate area, it was accessed as being cleared for investigation.

I apparated to an area a quarter mile from the incident site. It was dense woods, with no signs of life. A fire burned in the distance, so I made my way cautiously towards it. I cast the revealing spell, and confirmed that the area was presently deserted.

I broke through a thick bramble, and into a small clearing. A cabin, the source of the fire, was in the center. The fire was just beginning to spread, so I cast asphyxiation curses upon the fire to control it, which I did within minutes.

With the threat of fire attended to, I began to investigate the cabin. The glass windows had all exploded outwards, leaving little doubt it indeed was the source of the apparent explosion. The front door had been partially torn off its hinges, requiring the use of a levitation charm to allow access.

The cabin was a single room, with a wooden floor and the remains of smoldering furniture scattered about the room. There was a large crater in the floor, which suggested that the source of the explosion had been hidden below the floor. Upon investigation of the hollow, bits of stone were found within.

The shards of stone suggested that the magical explosion was caused by an overloaded keystone. As you're well aware, smaller

structures typically don't use dischargers, but rely on periodic cooling charms. It's a common occurrence for neglected wards to explode when remaining active for long periods without preventative maintenance.

Searching around the property, I found more chips of stone embedded into the wall and ceiling, but without knowing what the keystone looked like, it's impossible to determine what sort of wards were being used.

The fire was clearly caused by the intense heat of the failing keystone, and probably started before the explosion, though not a great deal of time would have separated the events.

Following the path of the fire, I discovered some interesting things. Five feet from the original explosion site, there was another hollow beneath the floor. All that remained within it were ashes; the contents damaged too great an extent to restore with a repair spell, making it impossible to gather any information from them.

The cabin seemed to have little in the way of personal effects. No pictures, personal letters, anything. Aside from a bed, a table, some chairs and a bookcase, there was little to distinguish it. The lack of personal items indicates that either the occupant had only been there for a short time, or that it was only an occasional dwelling.

Against the south wall leaned a bookshelf, which had been spared damage, as the table had absorbed most of the blast, and the fire hadn't yet reached it. The only intact personal items were upon the shelves. Oddly, almost all of them were exclusively muggle in origin. The topics included muggle theology, philosophy, psychology and history. I've enclosed a full book list at the end of the report.

While cataloguing the books, a small scrapbook was discovered on the top shelf, wedged tightly between two thick muggle history volumes. They contained newspaper clippings, from a wide variety of Wizarding publications, very much unlike the muggle literature.

The subject of the articles pertained entirely to the Ministry's most notorious enemy of state, Undesirable #1. All of the articles printed were from a time period of late 1990 to late 1991, a year's worth. The occupant didn't seem to distinguish between positive or

negative, which is a source of frustration to us, since it makes it difficult to tell if they were a supporter or not.

Enclosed is a copy of all the articles recovered from the scrapbook. If you wish, we could have investigators go over the originals, to see if any further information can be gathered from it.

I wouldn't have even brought this issue to your attention, were it not for the Ministry's pressing need to find Undesirable #1. At this point, any clue should be investigated to the fullest extent.

In my professional opinion, there's not much here. There were no personal comments within the scrapbook. Talking with our runes experts, they suggest that an explosion of this size, of this magnitude, was probably in the making for two years, strongly suggesting this trail is cold. However, if you wish, I will have the cabin be put under surveillance.

- Terrence Higgs, Junior Auror

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Author Notes:

Surprisingly, most of all to myself, I was able to get this chapter done in the timeframe presented last chapter. Hopefully this admittedly small trend continues.

I didn't want to do the typical "bunch of Rita Skeeter" articles, so I thought I'd present the information in a different manner, and set it within the larger framework of the plot, to show how Harry goes from media darling to potential Dark Lord.

The next chapter will continue the narrative at the Flamel Estate, and should be finished by the end of October.

Any comments, suggestions or criticisms would be deeply appreciated. I'll make an effort to answer every review I get.

Thanks to my co-conspirators, darklordmike and mira mirth, for their valuable assistance with plotting, characterization, continuity and grammar. They put a huge amount of effort into helping me hammer

out the kinks in this chapter, as I had immense trouble with the articles.

DLP Thanks:

Thanks for reading.

Sixth Movement: Immortality Passion

January 10, 1991

At last.

He let out a deep breath of relief, the exhaled vapor becoming visible in the frigid night air. Against his chest, bundled under the thick, bulky, fur-lined robes he wore, the silver amulet vibrated. It was one of the tools his master had bestowed upon him, the only way he could ever have found the object of his master's desire.

With hands swathed in heavy leather gloves, he reached within his robes, while decreasing the velocity of the Nimbus 1500. After a few frustrating moments, he pulled the wand from his left inner pocket, stopping the broom as he did. With the whitecaps below throwing flecks of sea-water onto his boots, he cast a spell upon his eyes.

The endless expanse of dark, violent ocean fell away as the spell took hold, quickly to be replaced by black ether. The only visible object in his altered perception was straight ahead of him. About a mile ahead of him was a huge, blinding white dome, the very protection that hid the entire island from sight. However, the powerful cloaking wards were like the scent of blood to a wolf to someone such as him, equipped with his Master's amulet, which detected large-scale magical output.

His destination uncovered, he took off towards the expanse of pulsating white light. As expected, the closer he got to the dome, the clearer its true form was. It was not a single dome, but a close grid of occasionally interconnected white lines that crisscrossed in every direction, creating the large barrier around the property, perhaps two miles wide through the center.

Being careful not to pass through the edges of the massive ward, he tracked the white lines with his well-trained eyes, searching for one that dove downwards. A minute into his examination yielded success, and he began to follow the ley-line on its twisting path downward.

Roughly one hundred feet from the original point, the ley-line terminated in a glowing elder Futhark rune, part of an array of five. He shook his head, a frown upon his features. A five-point array

would not serve his master's purposes at all. With a judicious eye upon the ward boundary, he began to trace out another ley-line, the thin strand of white magical energy leading him westward. Mild concern entered his thoughts as the roaring waves beneath him increased in volume, his altered visual perceptions preventing him from gauging how close he was to the icy water.

The ley-line terminated into another glowing white rune, part of an array of eight, the exact design specification he had been searching for. He cancelled his magical sight, hoping that the ward architects had not placed the array below the ocean's surface.

As luck would have it, the keystone onto which the runes were carved was set into a small section of jet-black stone that rose several feet out of the water, giving him ample room to work. The easy part completed, he prepared himself for the difficult work he had ahead of him.

He reached into his robe and withdrew a hollow circle, a foot in diameter, carved from a light brown stone. A flick of his wand later the circle was transfigured into the same black stone which comprised the keystone. Reapplying his magical perceptions, he pointed his wand at the nearest rune and concentrated upon it, tracing it fully. The trace completed, he cancelled the sight spell, and pointed his wand at the hollow circle, causing the outline of the rune to materialize upon the black stone of his circle. He repeated the process seven more times, until the glowing yellow outlines of all of the runes were transplanted onto his circle.

Taking another deep breath, he stowed his wand and withdrew a stone-carving knife. Concentrating with every available brain cell, he began to carve into the circle, fully cognizant that a false move could potentially destroy him in blast of fire. The scribing of runes was for good reason considered a delicate art, with runes not taking kindly to a careless hand.

Following a solid hour of carving, and heavy perspiration, he finished the circular runic array. He took a minute to check over the work, but soon confirmed it as flawless. He would have liked to admire it for a minute, but time was growing short. He stowed the circle and knife within his robes, then proceeded to withdraw both his wand and a single stone so opaque it was almost like glass, a "reader".

He brandished his wand before him, and concentrating deeply, a small sliver of magic began to creep from the tip. He connected it to one of the live runes on the array, taking great care to not touch the intersect between the rune and ley-line. The other end of the sliver, or "jumper," he attached to the stone, which immediately began to glow with a vibrant light-blue hue, indicating a magical concentration of ten Wenlocks being supplied by the rune.

The correct magical concentration gathered, he pulled out his own circle and conjured another jumper, connecting it to both the corresponding rune on the hollow circle and the reader. Quickly, he transferred the magic from the reader into the rune, the painstaking process the only reliable method for perfect duplication of magical concentration. With the process complete, the rune began to pulse slowly, threateningly. Charged runes with no outlet were dangerous creatures, very volatile, but quite beautiful in their detonations.

Not wishing to incinerate himself, he worked quickly to repeat the process for the other seven runes. Near the end the first rune began to emit heat, which spurred him to increase his pace. The heat of his newly created runic array increasing by the second, he attached jumpers from each rune on the circle to their counterpart on the original array, settling the two mere inches away.

With the real test of his mettle awaiting him, he took a deep breath, attempting to exorcise all the fear that tried to derail his plans. He released it slowly, before raising his wand above his head and waving it in a quick, wide, circular motion. The ley-lines tore free of the runic array, but immediately settled themselves upon the appropriate jumpers. The magic of the ward began to vibrate menacingly, before the ley-lines clove through the jumpers and connected with the new runic array, restoring the ward to its former slow, gentle pulse.

As the white dome continued undisturbed by the newly introduced array, he let out a shaky laugh, grateful that the hardest part of the break-in was complete. With a wave of his wand, he enlarged the hollow circle. It expanded widely but didn't disturb the runes, which continued to quietly go about their business of charging the ward. After a few moments, the interior ring was wide enough to fly his broom through.

A cold chill ran down his shoulders as he disillusioned himself. Camouflaged, he swung his broom around and flew towards the wide lane that led to the large manor that occupied the well-hidden island. As he beheld the white walls of the manse, he couldn't help but think that his master could not have picked a better thief to break into the fabled Flamel estate.

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2:00

Exactly as Harry had every morning since his arrival at the Flamel ancestral home, he found himself awake four hours after going to sleep. Both the Flamels and he were at a loss to explain the odd situation, but immediately before the four hour mark, he would find himself wide awake. Accompanying his departure from slumber was a great sense of restlessness, a driving urge to do something.

At first he fought it, squeezing his eyes shut tightly, as if he could ward off the alert feeling four hours of sleep always brought. However, he would have had comparable success holding back the tide. The Flamels had offered him sleeping potions, but he had always declined, as the meager amount of sleep he got was always enough to recharge him, to make him feel refreshed the next day. Aside from that, he did like the benefit of having time to accomplish more.

With a yawn based more on keeping with routine than anything else, he rolled out of bed, a cup of juice at the forefront of his mind. He considered calling the house-elf, Limey, but quickly discarded the idea. From his short time at the Flamel estate, it had become clear that he did not like house-elves at all. From their high-pitched voice to their slightly embarrassing exclamations upon even a little bit of thanks, Harry swore to never own one himself. Why did wizards find it so difficult to cook or clean for themselves?

He got up and stretched slightly before crossing the room. His new quarters were about three times larger than the room he had awoken in, and had its own private bathroom. The view was still great, but the cold January night was less than ideal to behold the sight. He strode over to the bookcase, running his fingers over the spines of the many tomes that littered it.

Under the instruction of Nicolas and Perenelle, he had grown quite comfortable with Herbology, Potions and magical history. Sadly, they were hesitant to actually let him practice magic of any sort. They claimed that with the whirlwind of vicious rumors circulating the Wizarding media outlets, it would lend credence to their insane claim if he was adept at magic upon arriving at Hogwarts.

While certainly not happy about their decision, he never challenged them on the subject. After all they had done for him; it would have been petty to pester them on this one subject. Besides, they had provided him with all the books he could ever hope for, and it wasn't like he was going to really need to use magic at his current home.

Speaking of which...

Settling upon a thick tome detailing the Dark Ages from the Wizarding point-of-view, he made his way through the darkened halls, towards the kitchen. At first the dark of the large, empty house had been intimidating, but the feeling faded after the first week. With all the white masonry and architecture, which looked pristine during the day, even the cloak of midnight failed to create a veneer of malevolence. In fact, his footfalls upon the marble floors were almost calming, almost like the heartbeat of night.

Walking slowly, he descended the main staircase, and made his way to the kitchen. His hand was reaching for the doorknob when he froze.

What the hell?

From the front door, he heard a light scratching of metal, as if someone was fiddling with the lock.

An animal would have just scratched at the door.

Hoping he was just being paranoid, Harry quickly slid over to the nearest alcove, trying to be as quiet as possible. Swathed by darkness, he slipped into the alcove and leaned against the cool stone. Settled against the wall, he found that he couldn't hear a solitary noise, save for the furious beating of his heart. He clutched the book closer to his chest, ears straining, trying to figure out whether he had actually heard anything.

Am I imagining things?

CLICK.

The loud noise quickly robbed him of that notion. No, whatever was happening, it certainly wasn't an illusion. Steeling himself, he peeked around the corner to the opening door, his eyes straining to decipher whatever sight awaited.

Nothing.

The door was indeed halfway open, but there only appeared to be night around it. Harry was at a complete loss. Was it possible for the wind to open doors?

Yes, Harry, the wind blew the heavy door open. It also fumbled with the lock and disabled it.

Before he could examine the phenomenon more closely, the door began to close itself. Not like a draft pulling it tightly shut, but lightly, the jam barely clicking as the door was closed safely.

Harry, this is impossible, and you know it. Stuff like this doesn't just happen. Look closer.

With a judicious eye, he began studying the area in front of the door. Beneath closer scrutiny, he noticed a slight distortion moving away from the door, rippling as it passed through the white light of the moon. The image departed just as quickly as it arrived, but it seemed vaguely human-shaped.

A thief? Maybe he's after some of Nicolas' rare potions?

He shook his head slightly. It didn't matter who they were, or what they were doing here, all that mattered was how he would react to it. He thought for a second, before the solution became clear. After all, the little bugger had practically begged him to ask for help whenever he needed it. He just couldn't do so within earshot of the intruder.

Thus, a game of sorts began. Though the urge to call for the elf tempted him like an unreachable itch, he resisted. The elf's loud voice would definitely be heard if he called now, even if he whispered his call, and the elf followed his lead. He believed he saw

random patches of distortions walking towards the basement door, but half of them could have easily been his own frantic imaginings. Whoever they were, they didn't make any sound as they walked the marble floor.

That is, if they had ever walked at all. What if they had never moved, and were just waiting for you to reveal yourself?

Not exactly comforted by his traitorous thoughts, he continued to wait, knowing it was his best option. He almost let out a heavy sign of relief when the basement door began to open. Though his first instinct was to call Limey, prudence won out.

One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven.

Second by painstaking second he tracked the time, getting all the way to sixty seconds before he allowed himself to call for the elf.

"Limey," Harry whispered.

Limey appeared beside him with a gigantic crack, which echoed throughout the house.

"Master Harry!" Limey screeched from the shadows next to him.

Fucking great.

"There's an intruder in the house! Go find Nick!"

Not stopping to reply, Limey disappeared with another monstrous crack, leaving Harry once again by himself.

His momentary solitude was broken by the basement door creeping open, causing Harry to crouch down within the shadows, all while praying the intruder didn't decide to light up the place. With a horrible sinking feeling, he observed as a large ball of light flew out from behind the door and shot out into the middle of the hall, throwing the massive room under a harsh light.

Harry's dilated pupils reacted badly with the light, sending pain shooting through his head. With a curse, he rushed out of the alcove, and began backpedaling away from the basement door. The

shimmering distortion, seemingly more solid than before, launched a blue, fast-moving spell at him.

No alternative in sight, Harry raised the heavy tome in defense. The spell crashed into it, detonating the book and throwing him backwards. He landed hard on his back, and rolled to the right, a red spell gouging into the marble he had laid upon seconds ago.

"You shall not harm Master Harry!" Limey screamed from a point above him. At the house-elf's words, two statues flanking the central staircase came to life, and advanced upon the intruder. The nearest one, a six-foot Wizard, brought a fist down. The thief, black poking through his shimmering shield, jumped to his left and brought up his wand. As the white fist shattered through the stairs, the intruder blew up its upper body with a spell, showering marble dust and fragments everywhere.

His form now outlined in white, the intruder's eyes found Limey, perched upon an upper alcove. He leveled his wand at the elf, and fired off an orange curse.

"Limey, get out of the way!" Harry screamed.

The elf did no such thing, choosing to continue using the other statue, a witch, as a marionette. The marble arm swung forward just as the orange spell struck the elf, detonating it in an explosion of blood and marble. As guts and appendages rained down, the intruder brought up his wand arm, conjuring a large, grey shield.

The shield shattered under the statue's blow, sending the intruder flying backwards, striking the marble railing with a loud crack. Harry, who had watched the spectacle in awe, hoped that the blow from the now-stilled statue was enough to keep the intruder down.

You know it would be stupid to assume that at this point, right?

Harry slowly began backing away from the slow-breathing intruder. His invisibility had completely broken down, leaving an average sized form in a black cloak, with the hood pulled over. Even though the man was currently down, still being defenseless, Harry wanted as much space between them as he could. If he got lucky, he thought he could even make it out the front door.

As Harry Potter was slowly learning in his short life, rarely did luck go his way.

Rising unsteadily, the man rose to his feet, using the banister to pull himself up. His hood fell back, revealing a shaved head, and blood leaking from the corners of his mouth. With a shaky movement, lungs pulling in air raggedly, he brought up his wand and cast another orange curse at Harry. He dove to the side to avoid it, landing upon the floor. He rolled aside to avoid the incoming blue spell, which barely missed him. As he stopped, he saw a third orange curse streaking towards him.

With no way to avoid it, Harry saw watched his death approach him, on the wings of an orange spell.

A crimson, opaque shield sprang into existence mere feet from Harry, sending the orange curse off to the side, exploding harmlessly on the wall. Harry saw the intruder spin around, and followed his line of sight with his own.

Standing at the top of the stairs was Nicolas, eyes ablaze, wand aloft. With a complicated motion, he flung a silver spell at the man, twisting his wand slightly before casting. The silver spell increased with speed as it flew, slamming into the intruder's hastily conjured shield with a loud gong. The shield exploded in a shower of sparks as the concussion knocked the intruder backwards.

Pressing his advantage, Nicolas banished a large piece of loose marble at the man, striking him in the stomach. The wind forcefully pushed from his body, the man doubled over. Nicolas kept his wand pointed at the man, and jerked it upwards. Violently, the man's feet were cut out as he was flipped upside down, the force causing his wand to sail out of his hands. He hung suspended from an invisible point for a second before a red spell struck him. The intruder fell from orbit gracelessly, his head crashing against the cold marble.

The intruder felled, Perenelle ran from upstairs, hair amiss, and over to Harry.

That was too fucking close.

"Harry, are you okay!" Perenelle yelled, kneeling next to him.

His arm hurt a lot, probably from landing wrong on it while avoiding the intruder's spells. However, it could have been a lot worse.

"I'm okay, really." Harry stated. Over Perenelle's shoulder, he noticed Nicolas conjuring ropes and binding the intruder.

She smiled at him, and pulled him into a hug. Harry went into it willingly, and hugged her back, appreciative of the gesture.

"Harry, I am deeply sorry for allowing you to fall into harm's way." Nicolas stated.

Harry couldn't help the anger and frustration that welled up at the statement.

"Yeah, thanks, but how am I supposed to feel safe anywhere now? I can't even defend myself!"

Harry's angry eyes met Nicolas', who looked tired more than anything else. Nicolas looked like he was about to say something, but was cut off by Perenelle's wail.

He looked to the side, and saw the lower part of the elf's arm, with gristle hanging off the stump. At the sight, he forgot his anger, and thought of the servant creature that had so selflessly sacrificed itself.

"Limey's the only reason I'm alive right now," Harry stated, his voice full of sorrow. "He had the chance to save himself, but chose to attack the intruder again."

Harry remembered hearing Perenelle saying that Limey had been in their employ for a very long time, and she was probably very attached to him. He went over to Perenelle's crouched form and hugged her.

"I'm sorry I couldn't do more," Harry said, hoping to convey his gratitude for the small elf.

Perenelle smiled at him, wiping at her eyes.

"Harry, please do not worry, I do not blame you."

"Shit."

They both turned to Nicolas, who was going through the contents of the bag the thief had hidden under his robes.

"Pen, this was a professional thief."

The sorrow dropped out of her eyes at her husband's words.

"Was he after the Stone?"

With a heavy sigh, Nicolas nodded.

"This changes everything."

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

"Harry, are you sure that you want to see this?"

"I really do. This guy almost killed me; I think I deserve to know who he works for."

The worry upon Perenelle's normally cheerful face bothered him, but he felt like he deserved to know what was really going on here.

"I do understand, Harry, but you can hardly fault me for wishing that fate had not dealt you so many hardships."

Harry replied with an expression that was equal parts smile and grimace.

Perenelle started to say something, but reconsidered, instead focusing on the sight before them.

Both Harry and Nicolas' better half were located in a small, bare room with three grey walls. The fourth wall had a large one-way mirror that took up almost the entire surface, allowing for a clear look into the adjacent room. On the other side of the glass was a bare room, completely devoid of decoration. In the center was a single wooden chair, to which the unconscious prisoner had been trussed tightly.

Without his cloak, the intruder was far less intimidating. The man was small and very scrawny, with pinched features and hollow

cheeks. A good week's worth of scruff dotted his face, and a rapidly receding hairline topped his head. Harry couldn't help but be reminded of the winos he occasionally saw pass by the gates of the orphanage.

In front of the man stood Nicolas, his arms crossed, wand gripped tightly. He had a look of deep concentration upon his face. Harry thought it likely Nicolas was planning out the interrogation.

Harry turned his head to the side, just in time to see the door open. Dumbledore stepped through it, closing it quietly behind him.

"I wish the circumstances were more pleasant, but regardless, good morning to both of you."

Perenelle glanced at him, worry lining her face.

"I would not refer to this morning as a good one, but it is good to see you here, Albus."

"I set out as soon as I received the message from Nicolas. How are you doing, Harry?"

"Everything was great up until that guy tried to kill me, but at least I'm not really hurt."

Before either adult could reply to Harry's statement, Nicolas uncrossed his arms and approached the man. The action drew the attention of all three people in the observation room, the conversation immediately forgotten.

Nicolas pointed his wand at the incapacitated man, and whispered "Ennervate".

The bound man began to open his eyes slightly, just in time to see Nicolas cast another spell.

"Confundo."

The spell struck him in the chest, causing him to sway back and forth slightly, but had no other visible effect.

What was that?

After a few seconds, the intruder seemed to register that there was another person in the room with him. He gazed at Nicolas with wide-eyes, as if he were slightly bewildered.

"Did I complete my mission?"

The man's question was spoken with a light, carefree air, as if he were asking what was for dinner. At the man's response, Nicolas' eyebrows contracted, and his frown became more pronounced. With a sigh, he withdrew a vial from his robes. The liquid within the vial was clear, but Harry was reasonably certain it wasn't water.

"No, not quite. You still need to drink this potion to complete the mission. Stick out your tongue."

Like an obedient dog looking to please its master, the man stuck out his tongue as far as he could and willingly swallowed the three drops of liquid Nicolas placed upon it.

Once the man had swallowed, Nicolas casually waved his wand over the glassy-eyed man. With a nod in the direction of the one-way mirror, Nicolas took a deep, steadying breath.

"What's your name?"

"I don't know," the man replied in a monotone voice.

Weary resignation found its way quickly onto Nicolas' face. Whatever was going on, Harry had a feeling that the situation wasn't entirely foreign to the alchemist.

"Who do you work for?"

The man looked almost insulted by Nicolas' question.

"I serve my Master."

Looking slightly frustrated, Nicolas tried again.

"Who is your Master?"

"My Master has always kept his identity secret. He's always covered beneath a dark cloak."

Nicolas threw a pointed glance at the mirror, causing Dumbledore to sigh deeply. He turned his head and looked at Harry.

"During the Wizarding war, this situation tragically cropped up occasionally. Using the Dark Arts, Voldemort and his followers would cleanse a mind of all thought, essentially destroying their identity. Making use of a modified pensieve, which is an object normally used to view memories, the unfortunate victim would have memories implanted into their mind. The memories were manufactured, typically containing information vital to completing a particular task. Typically this method was used when Voldemort wanted a high-risk task completed, and didn't want to deplete his own ranks."

Despite how obviously horrible the method sounded, Harry couldn't help but think there was a fatal flaw in the design.

"Sir, how can a person do anything if all they had were memories given to them?"

"In explaining the method, for the sake of brevity, I left out several steps. Deeds these horrible are a long, complicated process, which only a master of the mental arts can utilize. The mind isn't cleansed of all memories, but of all memories that pertain to any emotional responses within the victim. Family, friends, events, personal milestones...all gone, as if they never existed. All that remains is a bare shell, waiting to be programmed for a particular task, and to do it well."

Harry found himself shocked. How could someone be so evil, as to justify destroying not just a person's life, but his mind and personality as well.

After a moment, Nicolas continued his questioning.

"What mission did your Master send you on?"

"My Master wished for me to steal the Philosopher's Stone."

So it's not just a stone, but a stone of philosophy.

Harry had been curious about the 'Stone', which Perenelle had mentioned earlier, but both Flamels had said they would explain later. While he did want to know quite badly, he conceded that the current task was a bit more important.

"What did you do before the mission?"

"I did not exist before the mission. My Master created me for this one purpose."

Nicolas looked saddened by the man's statement, but in no way surprised. He thanked the man for his time before quickly exiting the interrogation room.

Harry couldn't help but feel sorry for the man tied to the chair. Even if the intruder had tried to kill him, it wasn't by choice. Turning his head, he regarded Dumbledore.

"Will he ever recover?"

Dumbledore shook his head slightly, his expression sorrowful.

"Sadly, this unfortunate soul will never have any sense of his past. The mental reprogramming process destroys all shreds of the victim's former life. Whoever this man was before his unfortunate encounter, he is now gone."

Harry didn't ever think that anyone could understand the torment of having one's past ripped away. However, what had happened to this man was far worse. Harry at least had some hope that one day his memory could be restored. This man had nothing, no hope.

The door to the observation room opened again, admitting Nicolas. He had a grave expression upon his face, and let out a long, shuddering breath before addressing the group.

"It is just as we feared, Albus."

"The Stone is indeed no longer safe," Dumbledore gravely stated.

Hearing mention of the Stone again refocused Harry's attention upon his previously unanswered question.

"What is the 'Stone'?"

The two Flamels both turned to him and regarded him quietly. It was not distrust he saw in their gaze, but an emotion he couldn't place. After several seconds, Perenelle broke the silence.

"The Philosopher's Stone is the creation that made my husband famous, a true form of alchemy. It produces the Elixir of Life, a liquid which has many amazing properties. It has the ability to turn ordinary metals into gold. However, that was of no interest to whoever destroyed the mind of that poor man."

Perenelle prompted her husband with a sharp look, and he picked up where she left off.

"The Elixir also has the ability to preserve the life of those who drink of it, providing that it is ingested on a regular basis, allowing the drinker to live an extraordinarily long life. Throughout the years, its legend has grown through exaggeration and has become myth. Most of Wizarding society now erroneously believes that the Elixir grants immortality."

Nicolas paused for a moment, glancing at his wife. She gave him an encouraging, if slightly sad, smile. Reassured, he turned to Harry.

"Perenelle and I are over six hundred years old."

What the hell?

He certainly hadn't been expecting that bombshell. Even the concept itself was elusive. The very idea that these people were still around when Columbus had yet to discover America, were still young when wizards working for the Vatican warded Galileo inside his own house was just...

Completely fucking crazy?

Yes, that. However, upon thinking about it, he always had the impression that there was something the Flamels weren't telling him, but he never imagined it would be something like this. He couldn't

really blame them for keeping their age to themselves, as it really wasn't any of his business.

Harry looked at them with wide eyes.

"I...I don't know what to say. That's the most amazing thing I've ever heard. I think the important question, though, is how you could study potions for six-hundred years without getting bored."

Harry's attempt to lighten the mood was met with chuckles from the three adults in the room. When the laughter died down, Dumbledore turned to Nicolas.

"Would you mind if I examine your prisoner?"

"No, of course not," Nicolas replied.

Dumbledore thanked Nicolas and exited the room.

If they have the ability to do so much good, why haven't they shared this knowledge with the world?

At worst, Harry figured they would just label the question as too personal.

"I don't want to be rude, but...."

"...you cannot help but wonder why we decided to selfishly keep such a revolutionary discovery to ourselves?" Nicolas finished for him.

Harry groaned slightly, expecting the Flamels to be unhappy with his questioning. He was unprepared for both of the Flamels to be wearing almost identical smiles.

"Oh Harry," Perenelle began, "while we are fairly certain you would have asked in a slightly more polite manner, it is a valid question."

In the background, Harry noticed Dumbledore begin to wave his wand around the prisoner in complicated movements. Nicolas, oblivious to the scene behind him, hung his head slightly as he began the explanation.

"The steps that led to the creation of the Stone were wrought with long, sleepless nights. In my haste, my excitement over this potentially new discovery, I did not document the steps properly. With my perceptions blurred by weeks of sleep deprivation, even when I view the memories in my pensieve, I cannot get a clear picture of the steps I took."

Nicolas stopped for a second, his eyes far away. Perenelle went up to him took his hand, squeezing it slightly. He favored her with a grateful smile, before continuing.

"Once the Stone was complete, I was never able to duplicate the result again, no matter how hard I tried. Regretfully, I then decided that I had worked too hard to let my hard work go to waste. I didn't even test it out properly."

The pain on Nicolas' face was evident, his regret ever more so.

"The Elixir of Life made both of us sterile. One foolish mistake, and a Light family that extended all the way back to Merlin himself had no more blood left to carry it on. Every day I consider myself lucky to have found a woman capable of such great acts of forgiveness."

Perenelle's eyes began to moisten slightly at her husband's declaration. Nicolas wiped at her eyes with his thumb, earning a smile of gratitude. Turning back to Harry, he continued.

"However, that is not the entire truth."

He took a deep breath before finishing the thought.

"Harry, I never aspired to be anything more than a competent wizard. Who lives, who dies...that is for fate to decree. The Stone had the potential to grant the power of the gods. That was not a power that I wanted to be involved with, but more than that, it was far too dangerous a tool to give."

"However," Nicolas continued, looking more anguished, "both Perenelle and I have loved life too much to truly let go. We still hold out hope that one day my efforts in the Bunker will end in success, so that I may restore the damage I have done, and we can share all that we've learned with our children."

The two Flamels embraced one another as the last words echoed away, Nicolas clutching Perenelle tightly, as if for support. Harry, slightly embarrassed, wanted to turn away from the emotional scene, but was aware that it would have been the coward's way out.

"Thanks for telling me about the Stone."

"Of course, we had never anticipated that the Stone would put your life in danger the way it had tonight, Harry. We can only hope that you will not start feeling unsafe in our home because of these events."

Harry smiled internally at Nicolas' words. Even if someone else tried to kill him tomorrow, he couldn't hope for a better home.

"There's no place I'd rather be."

At his words, Perenelle went over to him and enveloped him in a large hug.

"Harry, we feel the same way about you."

He returned it at her kind, heartfelt words, the first time he had done so. She smiled fondly down at him, before wiping her eyes slightly and moving back to her husband's side.

For the next few minutes the Flamels quietly talked to one another, while Harry found himself thinking about his two current guardians. In light of recent revelations, their seclusion now made far more sense, as did Nicolas' slavish dedication to this Potions. One day, Harry really hoped that Nicolas found a way to reverse the damage done.

Before Harry realized it, Dumbledore came back into the room. The Flamels released their embrace, and joined Harry in waiting to see if Dumbledore had discovered anything.

"It is indeed as you said, Nicolas; the unfortunate man's mind has sadly been destroyed."

"However, that is not the troubling part." Dumbledore sighed.

"How could the situation be worse for that poor man?" Perenelle asked, concern evident in her voice.

"There are no traces of Dark Magic on the man."

Both of the Flamels adopted a fearful expression upon their faces, but Harry's reaction was one of confusion.

"How is that even possible, if only Dark Magic could have damaged the man's mind so much?"

Dumbledore's bright blue eyes dimmed at the question, and shadows took their place.

"Voldemort, the same man that possessed you and killed your parents, once attended Hogwarts. He was a talented, charming man, and many did not suspect that such a dark side hid beneath his friendly persona. In order to keep his public image untarnished, Voldemort became nearly flawless at hiding all traces of Dark Magic once it had been performed. He had turned it into an art form."

Harry found himself weighed down at Dumbledore's words. The bastard that had possessed him before was potentially back. Dumbledore continued, breaking him from his thoughts again.

"Sadly, there is more to this, Harry. The ward-surpassing techniques used by the man were part of a warding memory set that Voldemort used on all the slaves that he bent to his will. We referred to these unfortunate souls as drones, which was a tactic all too common during the war."

Harry had allowed a sliver of hope that Voldemort was through heaping torment upon him.

Apparently not.

"So he's back then," Harry stated.

Just fucking great.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Breakfast the next day was a subdued affair, the events of the day before still hanging over the three people seated at the table. Dumbledore had summoned a house-elf from Hogwarts to temporarily replace the departed Limey. Perenelle had not said a great deal since the interrogation yesterday, Limey's death still weighing heavily upon her.

Harry understood that she had been rather attached to the house-elf, who had held tenure for seventy years at the Flamel estate. He wanted to comfort the grieving woman, but couldn't think of anything helpful to say.

"Are you okay, Harry?" Nicolas asked, breaking him from his thoughts.

Well, he was going to have to ask eventually...

"I'm fine, but something kept me up last night, kept me from sleeping."

"What would that be, Harry?"

"Well, you said that the Stone doesn't really make someone immortal, but stops people from getting old. If that's all it does, why does Voldemort want it?"

Nicolas looked somewhat mystified by Harry's line of questioning.

"Well, according to the investigation that Dumbledore performed in Godric's Hollow, he deduced that Voldemort was completely destroyed. At least, his body had been obliterated. Dumbledore long believed that Voldemort had created a Horcrux, which would anchor his soul to this world, despite the destruction of his body. Furthermore, Dumbledore theorized that with no body to retreat into, Voldemort probably existed in a wraith-like form."

That had been the precise thought that terrified Harry, and prevented sleep. The very idea that you could destroy someone's body and not kill them was terrifying. It did prompt a question, however.

"But didn't we destroy his Horcrux?" Harry asked.

Nicolas shook his head sadly.

"A few days ago, I thought he might be gone. However, the events of yesterday suggest Voldemort is still a threat. We believe that Voldemort, in his wraith form, may have possessed someone. If he were hiding in a body, we think he may have been able to survive the destruction of his Horcrux."

Perenelle spoke up suddenly, picking up where her husband's explanation left off.

"Voldemort is likely still weak, far too much so to retrieve the Stone himself. He may believe that he can use the healing powers of the Stone to begin to restore his own body."

Harry was confused by the final part of her statement.

"How can he fix his body if it's destroyed?"

Perenelle looked rather uneasy at Harry's question, looking to her husband for help.

"As hideous as it may sound, Voldemort may be able to use the Stone to begin transforming the body of his host into his own."

Silence greeted Nicolas' theory.

Possessing someone is horrible enough. Stealing their body though, piece by piece...

The thought was so repulsive to Harry that he shivered in his chair, goosebumps breaking out over his body.

Focus on something else, anything else. This is just too much.

"What can we do for the intruder?" Harry asked, desperate for a change of topic.

Nicolas looked rather stunned by the abrupt subject shift, but Perenelle gave him an encouraging smile.

"Sadly, there is not a great deal that can be done for his mind. We sent the wand to Ollivander, the finest wandmaker in England,

hoping that the intruder was using his own wand. Ollivander keeps track of every wand he has ever sold, so there is a possibility we could find out the true identity of the intruder. Providing that works, his family could provide enough memories to restore his mind using a pensieve."

Harry noticed that Perenelle didn't seem particularly hopeful about the man's chances.

"If Ollivander is unable to identify the wand, we will have to send him to St. Mungo's, where the mental experts can try to help him."

Harry really hoped that Ollivander would be able to identify the wand, as the second option didn't seem like it would succeed, considering St. Mungo's didn't have much to work with.

With a heavy heart, he began to enact the plan he had forged last night. He didn't like deceiving the Flamels, but he only survived last night due to blind luck.

"What's going to happen if Voldemort sends another drone?"

The Flamels looked at one another following his question. He thought he saw something unsaid pass between the two, but couldn't be sure. Turning back to him, Nicolas tackled his question.

"We have begun to strengthen the wards surrounding the island, but aside from that, the Stone will no longer be hidden here."

Harry shook his head violently at the statement, and began to work himself up.

"But Voldemort might not know that! He's going to send someone else, and I need to be able to protect myself!"

Perenelle grew slightly pale at his words, painfully aware of how close Harry had been to dying last night. Her reaction made Harry feel even worse, but he pushed on, shrinking his posture.

"I'm sorry, I'm just scared," he said quietly.

"That is quite alright, Harry," Perenelle reassured, grasping his hand over the table. "We are all afraid of Voldemort, and I realize that you need to be able to protect yourself."

Still patting Harry's hand, she turned to her husband.

"Harry has a point; we really should prepare him."

Nicolas didn't look pleased with the turn of events, and remained silent. Perenelle, undeterred, continued on.

"Nicolas, if Harry can't be completely safe at our home, who are we to deny him the tool to defend himself?"

Nicolas looked moved by his wife's words, and regarded Harry.

"I understand your concern, Harry. However, have you considered what the ramifications of training you early might be?"

Harry was honestly confused by the words, not seeing a downside to being able to protect himself.

"What do you mean?"

Nicolas sighed deeply.

"Due to the irresponsible journalism of the Daily Prophet, half of England believes you to be a budding Dark Lord."

"That's really stupid," Harry instinctively replied.

"Unquestionably, Harry. Nonetheless, if you arrive at Hogwarts, vastly ahead of your classmates in terms of magical skill, then it will be even harder to disprove their accusations. Especially if you get sorted into..."

Nicolas trailed off, shaking his head slightly before continuing.

"Harry, I understand why you want to learn magic. In your position, I would as well. I just want you to understand that your magical knowledge could make your life very difficult socially at Hogwarts. Are you truly prepared for that?"

Harry honestly did think about it. He knew that he tended to feel slightly awkward around people, and isn't exactly great socially. With that being said, however, he couldn't get the memory of last night out of his head.

When the intruder's third consecutive spell streaked towards him, he had been completely helpless. In that moment, he'd been convinced he wouldn't survive.

I will never be that weak again!

"I am, sir," Harry answered without regret, fully prepared to face any difficulties that time would bring.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Nicolas referred to it as 'The Shrine'. It lay behind one of the locked doors on the first floor of the west wing. A locked door was a security distinction not common to many of the rooms within the Flamel estate. Almost a living history lesson, it was a monument to the exploits, struggles and sacrifices made by the Flamel family throughout the centuries.

To Harry, it was the 'trophy room'. Paintings of long departed members of the Flamel family adorned the side walls, slumbering in their ornate frames. Placed between the paintings were glass display cases, showcasing various artifacts, heirlooms and treasures.

"Throughout Wizarding history, it has been tradition that the winners of battle claim the wands of their fallen foes. The Flamels, being one of the traditional paragons of the Light, have fought their share of battles, and won the vast majority of them."

With an outstretched arm, Nicolas motioned to the large shelf on the wall, comprised of hundreds of small wooden faceplates. Set in the middle of each faceplate was a handle, a half-circle made of gold.

He reached towards a ring set in the middle of the shelf, and pulled it out. The box was about two feet long, with purple velvet lining the interior. A single wand was placed within a slight hollow in the plush bottom lining, fit exactly to wand's dimensions. He plucked the wand from the box and held it lightly between his fingers, looking it over.

"While ideally one would get their own wand at Ollivander's, Perenelle and I do not think it would be a good idea for you to venture out into Diagon Alley. With the Ministry aggressively seeking to claim custody of you, it is not very safe right now."

Harry saw no need to argue. Lately the Prophet, unable to find any new information about him, had alternated between derogatory editorials about his supposed Dark Arts immersion, and calling for Dumbledore's head for hiding the Potter heir. The Flamels had told him life had been very difficult for Dumbledore as of late, but having not actually broken any laws, he could not be prosecuted.

"Eleven inches, oak, with a dragon heartstring core, if I'm not mistaken. I won it in a duel with Blake Malfoy, when I was but a young lad. Incompetent cad believed his novice forays into the Dark Arts would make a difference. My victory was swift and decisive, but I only took his wand, not his life. And here, I present to you, five hundred years later, the fruit of my efforts."

With an exaggerated flourish, Nicolas handed Harry the wand. He took it with a grin, enjoying the feel of the smooth, polished wood beneath his palm. A feeling of familiarity swept over him as he held the magical focus, prompting him to wonder just how much his previous self had used one.

"Go ahead; give it a wave," Nicolas kindly urged.

Harry did as bidden, bringing the wand about in a wide arc. His wonder turned to confusion as he observed that there was no effect.

"Was something supposed to happen?" Harry asked, eyeing the eleven inches of oak apprehensively.

"There should have been thunder and lighting," Nicolas replied in a grave tone of voice. "I am deeply sorry Harry, but it appears that you are a squib."

Snickering, Harry handed the wand back to Nicolas, who returned it to its proper spot on the wall.

"Wands are made of many different varieties of wood, with an even more diverse selection of cores. Often it is a long process to find even a compatible wand, let alone a primary one."

Nicolas withdrew another wand from the wall, examining it slightly.

"Birch and unicorn tail hair, eleven-and-a-half inches. I took it from Marlowe Gaunt, the head of the Gaunt family, one of the most respected families during the sixteenth century. He was one of the most fearsome opponents I ever faced, and I feel fortunate to have been the one who walked away."

"How do you know what each wand is?" Harry asked as he took the wand from Nicolas.

Nicolas smiled slightly.

"I once had one of Ollivander's descendants catalogue every wand in my possession."

Harry gave the birch wand a quick wave, causing a single spark to flutter out, almost reluctantly.

"This isn't the one, is it?" he asked, not exactly floored by the wand's response.

"If your ultimate goal is to best a flobberworm in a duel, then yes, this wand would do nicely."

Shaking his head slightly, trying to hide a grin, Harry handed back the wand.

"I do not expect to find a wand perfectly compatible with you, but there should be at least one wand here that will be close enough for you to begin to learn wandwork."

Nicolas replaced Marlowe Gaunt's former wand, and went over to one of the display cases on the side of the room, withdrawing a wand from it.

"This belonged to my nephew, Alphonse Flamel. His late fifteenth century defeat of the Dark Lord Torquemada brought an end to the alliance between the Vatican and most western European magical nations. While a turning point in magical relations in Europe, it sadly cost Alphonse his life."

Nicolas, whose voice had gotten more distant with each passing word, shook his head slightly before handing Harry the wand. He waved it around, but without any visible effect.

"This is going to take a long time, isn't it?" he asked rhetorically as he handed the wand back.

"It most certainly is," Nicolas agreed. "Perhaps you should cancel all of the dates that you had lined up for tonight."

"I heard somewhere that girls are into bad boys, but being the next Dark Lord might be a little too much," Harry replied, smiling.

Nicolas laughed as he placed his nephew's wand back in the display case, and withdrew another wand from the shelf.

"You don't want to know where this one came from," Nicolas smirked, handing the wand off.

Upon touching Harry's hand, unseen strength poured through him. Feeling like he could do anything, he brought the wand down in a quick arc, letting out a large jet of flames. Feeling triumphant, he looked up at Nicolas' wide smile.

"Ah-ha, Harry, it appears we have found you a practice wand! Feel free to pursue your scheduled dates after all."

"Why thank you, sir." Harry replied cheekily, still slightly elated from the feeling of power at his fingertips.

"Certainly, Harry." Nicolas replied. "However, I would urge you to get your fill of the fairer sex tonight. Tomorrow night you will be a bit too tired to entertain any of your prospects."

"Will you really start to teach me tomorrow?" Harry asked hopefully.

"Indeed I will. Best rest up, for tomorrow will be quite tiring for you."

Harry couldn't ever really recall looking forward to something potentially exhausting, but he supposed there was a first time for everything. He looked at the wand in his hand, reminded that its origin was still a mystery.

"Why don't I want to know where this came from?"

Nicolas' only answer was an innocent-sounding whistle.

"Nicolas, please tell me?"

Without answer, the alchemist began walking towards the door.

"Dammit," Harry muttered to himself.

He held the wand in front of him, and regarded it with suspicion.

"Where did you come from?"

Unsurprisingly, the wand had no answer. Shaking his head, he made his way towards the exit, where Nicolas was still chuckling to himself.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Following breakfast the next morning, Nicolas had led Harry to another one of the locked rooms in the west wing of the house, a few doors down from the 'The Shrine'. It was a large room, with cabinets and dueling implements nestled up against the white, stone walls. The entire center of the room was dominated by a sunken rectangular space, roughly three times as long as its width. Within the sunken space, with was lowered about two feet below the floor, were two circular platforms. Raised roughly six inches above grade, the platforms were about six feet wide through the center, and placed about twenty feet from one another.

"Welcome to the Flamel dueling room, Harry," Nicolas welcomed. With spry movements, he leaped down into the rectangular area, beckoning for Harry to join him.

"In this very space, generations of Flamels have trained beneath the careful eye of their elders. From the basic concept of magic, all the way to advanced combat training, this is where it all started."

Harry felt rather proud that Nicolas trusted him enough to allow him access to one of the Flamel family traditions.

"Thank you for showing me something so special to you," Harry said solemnly.

Nicolas smiled proudly at the statement.

"You are more than deserving, Harry. All that I will ever ask of you is to give your best effort. Are we clear on that matter?"

"Crystal clear, sir," Harry replied.

"In that case, let us begin. What is magic?"

Harry was dumbfounded for a second. He'd never really questioned the existence of magic, at least that he could recall. Struggling, he just blurted out the first thing that came to mind.

"Well, it's a...force...that can do stuff."

His face grew more crimson with each passing moment of silence after his statement, until it felt as if his face would ignite. Nicolas' stern look was slowly betrayed by the corners of his mouth turning up.

"At the very least, you are not using the textbook definition," Nicolas replied, laughing slightly.

Harry smiled, trying to think of a better way to define it, before it came to him.

"It's a gift."

"I couldn't agree more." Nicolas nodded. "From the moment that a child with a magical core is born, their lives are forever entwined with magic. It is ingrained into every breath we take, every action we perform, every job we undertake, every choice we make."

"I assume that choice is the important part," Harry added.

Nicolas nodded in response.

"Indeed it is, Harry. The very point that I want, no, that I need you to understand, is that magic is about choice. As you said yourself, magic is a gift. This gift, we all have the freedom to choose how we

use it. The greatest of good can be achieved with it, but conversely, so may the vilest of evils."

Nicolas paused for a moment, confirming that Harry was listening. Whatever he saw on Harry's face seemed to please him, as he continued immediately.

"How you choose to use magic is your business, and none of mine. Whether you use Light or Dark magic, that is entirely up to you. What is important to me is the complete retention of choice. Those who fall to complete Darkness lose the ability to choose, a dire consequence of being fully consumed by the Dark."

Harry nodded at Nicolas's distinction.

"So it's probably safe to say I won't be learning any Dark magic from you," Harry deduced.

"Correct you are, Harry, but most of the basic, beginner spells that I intend to teach are magically neutral."

"I'm happy to learn anything you'll teach me," Harry added eagerly.

"Ah, a teacher could ask for nothing better than an eager pupil."

Nicolas uncrossed his arms, withdrew his wand from the folds of his robe, and held it lightly in his left hand.

"How do you think magic works?"

Harry thought about all the books he'd read. Most of the texts he'd read dealt with magic in a more particular fashion, but he was fairly sure that he knew enough to answer the question.

"Words can make magic happen, but they don't have to be spoken. If a wizard is powerful enough, they can think the words, and do the same thing."

Nicolas listened to his explanation with a slight smile upon his face, leading Harry to believe this was the answer he had anticipated.

"How does transfiguration fit into your theory of how magic works?"

"Maybe a powerful wizard can just make magic do what they want."

"If that indeed is the case, then how is it that Transfiguration can be taught to first years at Hogwarts?"

Harry found himself at a loss, and was sorely tempted to answer that it was all due to divine intervention. However, Nicolas was doing him a favor, so it wouldn't do at all to be flippant.

"I'm not really sure." Harry shrugged.

"Magic is completely without form, without structure. It is only the mind that is structured, which is the fundamental part of how one channels magic."

Harry found himself confused even further, as the explanation flew in the face of everything he had ever read.

"If that's the case, then why do people bother with spells?"

Nicolas spread his arms dramatically, indicating distance.

"There is a huge, wide, fundamental disconnect between humans and magic, despite the existence of wizards. The math supports this conclusion, as only an extremely small percentage of humanity are born with magical cores, as opposed to the unicorn, to which every foal is born with inherent magic. The first Wizarding researchers, around the time of Roman Empire, discovered that their magic worked best when the mind was properly formed. To ease and simplify magical use for the mind, names were given to the effects possible with magic. These first labels became standardized across the Wizarding world."

When Nicolas stopped, Harry found himself full of questions. He seemed to realize this, and regarded Harry with a fond smile.

"You have a few questions, I take it?"

Harry nodded enthusiastically.

"Is this why most of the spells we learn are Latin?"

"It certainly is, but I believe you were fairly certain as to the answer. What is really confusing you?"

"Well...if the mind is the only important part of magic, what's with the wand movements?"

Nicolas inclined his head slightly in approval.

"That is a much better question. The wand movements are important, as they govern the flow of magic through the wand. The more powerful the spell, the more vital the movements are. Allow me to demonstrate."

Nicolas turned to his right, and held his wand more tightly.

"Activate target seven."

At his words, a column of stone began to rise out of the floor. When the stone had risen to its full height of four feet, Nicolas held his wand in front of him. He slashed his wand to the right, then jabbed it forward, twisting the wand slightly. The same silver spell that he used against the intruder erupted from his wand, and slammed into the stone block, without doing damage to it. The spell completed, he turned back towards Harry.

"The 'Clypeus Concussus' is a Light spell that sends concussion waves through magical shields, proportional to the strength of the shield being used. It is a fairly complex, power intensive spell, so the wand movements are critical. Starting to the left, and then slashing to the right, or vice versa, is referred to as a 'drawing motion'. The motion pulls magic forth from the magical core of the user, almost as if charging the spell. The forward jab is indicative of an offensive movement, channeling the magic in a direction away from the caster. The twist at the end..."

Nicolas trailed off, smirking slightly.

"That is a bit too complicated for a first lesson. Ultimately, only more powerful spells are really particular about wand movements. Weaker spells, not drawing as heavily upon the magical core, can still be cast with poor wand movements, but their power will be decreased, proportional to how sloppy the wandwork is. Of course, if I am to

teach you, I will expect you to take pains to assure your wandwork is precise."

"I won't let you down," Harry blurted out, "I'm really going to work hard at this."

Nicolas looked at him with approval in his eyes.

"I am pleased to hear that. To answer the original question posed, however, transfiguration draws upon pure, unformed magic to perform tasks. More than any other magic, transfiguration is will-based, rather like an evolution of accidental magic. It is usually very hard for those new to magic to have success with, as it is one of the most formless of the magical disciplines, but it becomes easier with time and maturation of the magical core."

"What exactly is the magical core?" Harry asked, never really finding an adequate explanation for the term.

"The magical core is an organ, but magical as opposed to physical, from which all of our magic...flows. The soul also contains a small amount of magic...but that is neither here nor there. Regardless, the magical core functions similar to a muscle. The more it is used, exercised, the larger its capacity for channeling magic. Younger children typically have trouble casting spells, because of their relatively weak and unused cores, but with repeated magical usage the core grows stronger. Does it make sense now?"

"Yeah, I understand now," Harry replied.

"Splendid. Now would you prefer to keep stalling, or would you like to actually perform some magic?"

Harry chuckled gleefully, before answering in the affirmative.

"Excellent. The first spell I want you to try is the tickling hex, Rictumsempra, which is a rather weak spell, well-suited to beginners. The wand movements are simple, just a jab forward followed by the incantation. Try to hit the target, if you can."

The last of Nicolas' words held a small degree of challenge within them, which Harry fully intended to meet. Following Nicolas' instructions, he jabbed his wand forward.

"Rictumsempra!"

A light blue jet of light sprung from his wand and struck the right edge of the target with a muffled thud. Even though the spell almost missed, he was elated to have actually met Nicolas' challenge. Looking to his left, he saw that Nicolas was in awe, his mouth hanging open slightly.

"Well, it appears that I am going to have to jettison the next part of my script, where I encourage you by telling saying that no one succeeds on their first attempt, and that it usually takes several days of hard work to achieve any effect."

Slightly taken aback by Nicolas' words, he glanced at his wand, with slight suspicion.

"Is this rare?" Harry asked.

"Very much so," Nicolas replied with a slight smile. "I was going to start you off with a few different spells, but I want to try something first."

Nicolas reached into his robes, and withdrew a silver spoon. Harry gave it an inquisitive look, trying to figure out why he had a spoon.

"Stealing silverware again?"

"Guilty as charged. I did not think this would happen, but I wanted to be prepared in case you did prove...to be different. In order to transfigure something, you must have a clear picture of the end result, and how it goes through those changes."

Nicolas held the silver spoon aloft, giving him a clear view of it.

"How do you think that one might go about changing this into wood?"

"Well, I think I'd just picture the silver becoming less shiny, making it darker, morphing it into wood."

Nicolas looked pleased by his hypothesis.

"That sounds like a fine starting point," Nicolas said, placing the spoon on the floor. "Give it a try."

Taking a deep breath, Harry leveled his wand at the spoon. In his mind, he pictured the spoon losing its bright sheen, pushing magic into his wand. He then darkened the color of the picture in his mind, picturing the smooth metal turning to rough wood.

With an exhale, he lowered his wand, and picked up the spoon he had been concentrating on. It felt rough upon his hands, completely unlike silver. Daring to hope, he raised it before his face for inspection.

It was perfect.

Harry was dumbfounded.

Was all magic this easy?

He looked to the side, to see Nicolas with his arms crossed, in deep contemplation.

"I guess this isn't normal either."

Nicolas shook his head slowly.

"No, it most certainly is not. You must have used magic before in your past."

Harry became slightly agitated at the comment. Of course he had used magic while possessed, but he hadn't exactly been in control.

Nicolas read the look on his face, and realized what he had implied.

"Let me apologize, Harry, I was not clear. The soul fragment in your body was most likely using your core as an amplifier, which limited the scope of the spells cast, but not the power. To accomplish a transfiguration such as this on your own, without training...it should not be possible."

Harry's momentary displeasure faded at Nicolas' words.

"But I don't remember anything about magic...from before."

"That does not matter," Nicolas said quickly, "the willpower and visualization required for transfiguration are reflexive once mastered."

Harry was quiet for a moment, trying to digest what Nicolas was implying. He had always assumed that someone else had created the architecture of his mind, that he had merely been given the keys. Did he have a hand in creating it?

"What does this all mean?" Harry asked in a small voice.

"First, you are extremely advanced for your age, and should make every effort to not flaunt your magical skill at Hogwarts during your first year."

"What else?"

A smile grew upon Nicolas' face.

"Training you is going to be far more enjoyable than I originally anticipated."

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Author Notes:

It's nice to finally post a chapter in a timely fashion. I certainly hope this trend continues.

There's one more chapter left in this arc, which covers Harry's time with the Flamels. After that, we shall be following our green-eyed hero to Hogwarts. I believe I'll be able to get the next chapter out by mid-November, but as always, my update schedule is vulnerable to the vagaries of life. And video games.

Any comments, suggestions, or criticisms would be deeply appreciated, and inspire me to write as opposed to playing video games. I'll make an effort to answer every review I get.

Thanks to my co-conspirators, darklordmike and Mira Mirth, for their valuable assistance with plotting, characterization, continuity and grammar. Their combined efforts probably save me at least a week of editing every chapter, and are deeply appreciated. Also, thanks to charmscharles for his plotting suggestions.

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Thanks for reading.

Seventh Movement: A Shape in Fair Disguise

April 29, 1991

Three months after Harry's first training session

"Rictumsemptra!"

"Protego!"

Harry's conjured shield batted away Nicolas' hex, sending it flying into the perimeter dueling wards.

"To the right," Nicolas said, firing another tickling hex at him. Harry angled his wand to the right as he conjured another Protego. The crimson shield, conjured at a forty-five degree angle, deflected the hex perpendicular to his body, where it dissipated harmlessly into the translucent blue wards.

"Come on, Harry!" Nicolas urged. "Your wand does not have to follow the exact trajectory of the shield! Again, the right way this time! Morsus!"

Harry brought his wand up again, snapping it to the right and twisting it as he spoke the incantation. The shield appeared slightly curved this time, again deflecting the minor hex away from him.

"That is how I want to see it every time! Again, to the left! Morsus!"

Harry repeated the same motions as before, only on his left side this time. Upon the deflected spell hitting the wards, Nicolas broke into a wide grin.

"Excellent, Harry! Right back at me this time! Confundo!"

Harry tracked the yellow charm with his eyes, in a split second determining its position. He jabbed his wand forward, conjuring the shield so that the flat center lay in the path of the charm. His aim true, the spell struck the flat part of the shield, and deflected back the way it had come. Nicolas, a roguish grin upon his face, cut his wand across his body, casually swatting the spell into the wards.

"Deactivate perimeter dueling wards," Nicolas loudly spoke, prompting the translucent blue wards to fade away. The wards gone, he walked over to Harry.

"Very good work today, Harry. Your progress on the Protego Shield has been quite remarkable. I believe you will have it nearly mastered by the end of the week."

"Thanks. When are you going to teach me to swat aside spells?"

Nicolas chuckled at Harry's question.

"You certainly are the shrewdest snot-nosed child that I have ever had to work with."

"At least I have one honestly earned title," Harry retorted, grinning.

"Indeed. While you certainly have the speed and reflexes to learn it, it is an advanced technique, and I want you to be comfortable with the basics before we move on at all."

"Is this how you learned magic?" Harry asked.

"Not at all," Nicolas replied, shaking his head. "Throughout the years, I have found that most eager wizards set out to learn as many spells as they can, the philosophy being that a large spell lexicon is the most important facet of dueling."

"But isn't that true?" Harry interjected.

"It is not," Nicolas stated. "When a wizard rushes to learn many spells, they do not focus on the mechanics or multiple uses that a single spell can have. There is a chasm of difference between 'knowing' a spell and being privy to all of its nuances. Ultimately, a wizard with mastery of five or six spells will be far more effective than one who has basic knowledge of thirty."

To Harry, this seemed be completely at odds with everything he'd read.

"I'm...um...wouldn't having thirty different spells make up for not being great at them? I mean, doesn't that make it harder to defend against?"

Nicolas chuckled at Harry's apparent confusion.

"Not necessarily. The Protego Shield, as you know, is a low-level shield, designed for defense against low-level spells. With a competent protego, which you are well on your way to possessing, a wizard has a defense against almost every other low-level spell. Since a wizard who has mastered the Protego Shield can deflects spells back at the caster with reasonable accuracy, the shield has an offensive component. Since spells can be deflected at angles as well, this simple shield spell can be used both as an offensive and defensive tactic if in combat with two wizards at once."

"Yeah, that does make sense," Harry begrudgingly responded, prompting a knowing smile from Nicolas.

"If I did not possess some sort of wisdom after over six hundred years, it would be a very sad state of affairs."

"Perenelle thinks it's a sad state of affairs," Harry added helpfully.

"That is unquestionably true," Nicolas deadpanned.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

In no time at all, Harry began to regard training hours with Nicolas as his favorite time of the week, and would have happily continued with his established routine until he went off to Hogwarts. Perenelle, however, had other ideas. Towards the beginning of May, she finally confronted her husband.

"He needs to interact with children his own age," she said firmly.

"We have been over this before," Nicolas replied, shaking his head. "We cannot chance an information leak. If any British children learn of his whereabouts, it is a liability risk, which could get back to the Ministry. We long ago conceded that getting Harry to Hogwarts without the awareness of the Ministry was more important than his social life."

"Then foreign children it shall be," Perenelle concluded, her tone allowing no argument. "I know just the family we need."

Harry wasn't quite sure what to expect, but the breathtaking blond Veela who arrived on a warm spring day two weeks later was not it.

The Delacour family apparated directly into the Flamel living room, a loud crack accompanying their arrival. There were three of them: a father, a mother and a daughter. The woman was one of the most beautiful he had ever seen. Tall, lithe, with golden blonde tresses that spilled down to the middle of her back, even her skin seemed without blemish.

The man standing besides her, clearly her husband, was of approximately the same height. As light as his wife's complexion was, his was dark, olive-tinged. Dark hair hung down on either side of his face, neatly parted in the middle.

Harry, however, only had eyes for their daughter.

She was her mother in miniature, only more radiant. Her flowing hair was silvery, making her almost too bright to behold. While her parents were dressed in ornate, expensive looking robes, she was clothed in a light blue sundress. Even the slight pout upon her face could do nothing to detract from her beauty.

The woman approached Harry, and gave him a chaste kiss upon the cheek, breaking him free of his reverie.

"Eet eez a pleasure to finally meet you, 'Arry," the woman greeted warmly. "I am Apolline Delacour, and zis eez my 'usband, Claude."

The man in question stepped forward, hand extended. Harry gripped the outstretched hand and pumped it once, feeling the strength behind the grasp.

"I've heard a great deal about you from Perenelle, Mr. Potter."

"Nothing too bad, I hope," Harry replied, trying to maintain his composure.

Claude smiled at his statement. "Nothing too incriminating, I assure you. Allow me to introduce my daughter, Fleur."

The teenager in question sent a curt nod in his direction, before tossing her hair over her shoulder, and resumed examining her nails. Harry was left without a reply, but was luckily saved by Perenelle.

"Fleur, dear, our manor grounds are quite lovely this time of year. Perhaps Harry could take you on a tour of it?"

Fleur didn't look thrilled at the prospect, but forced a smile onto her face.

"I am sure ze grounds would be beautiful, madame, but I don't want to impose on your 'ospitality."

Apolline quickly overrode her daughter.

"A lovely idea. Fleur would be absolutely delighted to have young 'Arry show 'er about ze grounds." At the lack of response from her daughter, her eyes narrowed slightly. "Een fact, Fleur would be delighted for zis tour now," Apolline supplied, her voice slightly raised, the emphasis on the last word.

Fleur let out an angry breath of air, displacing her silvery locks slightly.

"Yes, I would be most delighted," Fleur replied with barely concealed contempt, before fixing her gaze on Harry. "Well?" she demanded, hands placed upon her hips.

Harry jumped slightly at being addressed, and tried to smooth over the moment by pretending he wasn't at all dazed by Fleur's astounding beauty.

"Er, yes, let's go," he said, valiantly ignoring the adults surreptitiously smiling – or in Nicolas' case, outright laughing – at his embarrassment.

His face burning, he moved towards the room's exit. He opened the door for Fleur, who passed him without a second glance, nose up in the air. Undeterred, he hurried after the rapidly retreating form of Fleur, who was walking quickly, forcing him to break into a jog to compensate for his relatively short legs.

Unable to catch up before she exited the manor, he caught up to her as she was staring about the grounds. She actually seemed to be pleased by the vast greenery around her, which was a pleasant change from her earlier demeanor. Encouraged, he tried to talk to her.

"Is this the first time you've seen the Flamel manor?"

Fleur turned to him, flipping her long, silvery hair over her shoulder. The bright mid-day sunlight reflected beautifully off it, almost giving her a heavenly glow.

"Oui," Fleur replied. "Ze Flamels rarely 'ave visitors, but the Flamels wanted the leettle boy staying with zem to socialize. And zen of course Monsieur Flamel asked us, and eet eez is a great 'onour. Nicolas eez a great legend, don't you know?"

Fleur's hair. It was so beautiful. And her figure –

Wait, was she waiting for an answer?

"Uhhh...."

Harry's articulate reply was met with a smile by Fleur, whose radiance seemed to increase by the second.

"And Papa said, we will be delighted, and I theenk 'e 'as been 'ere once, but eet eez my first time, and eet eez a beautiful place, eet eet not?"

"Umm..."

Fleur seemed encouraged, rather than deterred, by his incoherence.

"Mais oui, not as beautiful as our 'ome, or as Beauxbatons, but eet eez a delightful place, still."

Her radiance increased even more so, and a recessed part of Harry's mind started screaming, telling him that something was wrong.

"I would like to see zis place very much, 'Arry," Fleur said, before sighing heavily, exaggerating the motion. "Merde, but I do not want zis leetle boy around me like ze lost puppy."

She motioned to the stairs of the manor, a triumphant smile upon her face.

"Why don't you sit 'ere, and leave me alone?"

His foot twitched slightly, before reason began to kick in.

Hey asshole, see that triumphant smile? She thinks she controls you! Show her no one owns you!

His mind coming back to him, Harry clamped down mentally, expelling the shining brightness from his sight. Quickly the sheen disappeared, leaving behind only the beautiful French girl, and her fading smile.

"That's a really nice trick you have there," Harry deadpanned.

Fleur scowled at him, not at all pleased with the turn of events.

"What do you know of eet?" she demanded.

Oh, Harry knew a great deal. He knew that he was really pissed off that someone had the audacity to fuck with his free will. He'd had enough of people fucking with his mind to last a lifetime.

"I know that I don't go people's houses, and try to use mind control on them."

Fleur laughed derisively at his statement.

"Oh yes, 'Arry. Zat eez what ze leetle boys always say. Merde, poor us, zat evil girl made me do eet, I couldn't help myself. Zey always like to blame ze girls."

"Well, when you use your Veela aura, there's not much we can do, is there?"

Fleur was angered by Harry's accusation.

"How dare you accuse me of using ze Veela charm?"

Harry smirked at her, not buying her righteous indignation.

"You know, I've read about Veela, and how they use their charm to get people to do stuff. I thought you were one when I arrived, but my mind stopped working. I think you were using it from the start, trying to control me, to get out of doing something your parents forced you to do."

Fleur's intent gaze turned from mere anger to burning rage.

"You know nothing of zis, what eet eez like to be Veela!" she yelled at him, composure temporarily lost.

"Yeah, you're right, I don't know much about enslaving young boys," Harry retorted with mock sincerity.

With an inarticulate cry of rage, Fleur withdrew her wand and yelled "Iimox evomere!".

Harry grinned maliciously as he withdrew his own wand, twisting it slightly while he conjured a shield. Her curse rebounded off it, taking the exact trajectory he had planned. His smile widened as the green spell zipped past her shoulder, shredding the left strap of her sundress.

"Merde!" Fleur exclaimed, thinking the spell had missed her completely. "I am so sorry, 'Arry! I don't know what came over me!"

Harry, noticing the left side of her strap begin to lose its battle against gravity and droop down, began to turn around. He considered not telling her, but she had shown remorse for her actions.

"The spell clipped your dress," Harry explained, his back to the part-Veela. "You might want to do something about that."

"Merde!"

He tried not to laugh as he heard Fleur set about repairing her sundress. While it might have been satisfying to laugh at her, it

certainly wouldn't do anything for English-French relations. After a minute, her voice rang out.

"Eet eez safe to look."

Harry turned around, to see Fleur's sundress completely repaired. Harry's ensuing surprise was not feigned; it looked as good as new.

"That's impressive," Harry said, motioning to the mended strap. "It looks like new."

"Merci, 'Arry. Please forgive my actions, now eez not...nevermind," she finished with a sigh.

Whatever was bothering her, he didn't quite think it excused her rude actions or words, but chose to let it slide.

"What spell was that?" Harry asked, having never seen it before.

Fleur seemed eager to leave the subject of her temper flare behind, and answered quickly.

"Zat was ze slug vomiting 'ex."

"Why the hell would you use something as disgusting as that?" Harry asked incredulously, repulsed by the concept.

"Not zat eet mattered," Fleur replied dismissively, "you were able defend eet well. Zat was an impressive shield. Did Nicolas teach you?"

"Yeah, he did," Harry replied, not happy with Fleur's casual dismissal of her own actions.

"Eet eez clear 'e did a good job. Surely such talent will be attending Beauxbatons in ze fall?"

Harry shook his head slightly.

"No, it's something of a family tradition to go to Hogwarts."

"Why? Beauxbatons eez clearly a better school," Fleur insisted.

"Dumbledore is the Headmaster of Hogwarts," he retorted. "Isn't he considered the most powerful wizard in Europe?"

"And what does zis power 'ave to do with ze teaching? Beauxbatons 'as ze finest professors een all of Europe!"

The fresh memory of easily deflecting her spell came to mind, eliciting a smile.

"How about we put your theory to the test?"

Fleur laughed derisively.

"Zis leetle boy theenks 'e can do better than me? I do not theenk so, 'Arry, as eet would only embarrass you."

Harry's smile stretched even wider.

"Bold words coming from the girl who just got beat by someone ten years old."

"Zat was a lucky thing," Fleur claimed, eyes narrowed.

"Well, why not let me prove it wasn't just luck?"

Fleur started laughing uproariously, tears beginning to leak from the corners of her eyes.

As Harry fumed at Fleur's less than accommodating reaction, she walked over to him, and gave him a condescending pat on the head.

"I will not be responsible for 'urting a leetle boy who eez under ze care of ze Flamels. Mama and Papa would not be 'appy eef I did zat."

Harry scowled, his desire to prove himself being denied.

"I think that you're just afraid of losing to a ten year old."

Fleur shook her head in mock sadness.

"Ze leetle boy still will not give up, and continues to believe 'is pathetic attempts to goad me to fight will work. Let me assure you,

'Arry, zey will not. You are just a leetle boy, who thinks a good shield makes 'im an expert."

Harry, starting to lose his temper, spun around and stormed off. Fleur let out a cruel laugh at his departure.

"And now ze leetle boy stomps away like ze spoiled child 'e eez, probably to go 'ave 'imself a temper tantrum. 'Ave fun, leetle 'Arry."

Harry refused to rise to her bait, despite how angry he was getting. Nothing would delight her more right now than him yelling back at her.

"Maybe ze boy eez starting to grow up a leetle," Fleur said to his retreating form. "Eef 'e continues to mature, maybe 'e will be ready for zat test een a few years."

"Maybe," Harry replied without turning around, walking back toward the manor.

And that time could not come soon enough for him.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

July 31, 1991

Six months after the break-in

Harry was honestly trying not to laugh, but the spectacle before him made it an exercise in self-control.

In what he could guess had been an attempt to follow a muggle tradition, the Flamels had decided to make Harry a cake, with a candle for each of his eleven years on Earth. However, the similarities between that and a muggle birthday cake ended there. As opposed to the tiny, slim candles on muggle cakes, the Flamels had used large candles an inch in diameter, their heights increasing the closer to the center they were located. The central candle was two inches wide and perhaps almost three feet tall.

All of this was located on a cake perhaps eighteen inches wide. To Harry it looked like an upside-down, frosted chandelier.

"Happy birthday Harry!" Dumbledore, Nicolas and Perenelle exclaimed.

"Thanks," Harry remarked, his grin stretching from ear to ear. Even if the cake was a little unorthodox, it only heightened his joy at the celebration.

"Blow out the candles!" Nicolas urged. "That is how the muggles do it, correct?" he added, slightly less sure of himself.

Harry nodded.

"Yeah, they do, but the candles usually aren't this big."

A slightly devious smile upon his face, Harry withdrew his practice wand and pointed it at the candle tips.

"But I think I know what to do. Flaminis."

The whispered "gust of wind" spell extinguished the flames efficiently, allowing for the Flamels to pluck the candles out one-by-one. Once all the candles were removed, Harry couldn't help but think that a family of moles had taken residence in the cake, making tunnels as they pleased. Regardless, it still looked pretty good.

Perenelle, however, was looking at the birthday dessert with mild trepidation.

"I do not think the cake ended up close to the muggle tradition we were aiming for," she began, before Harry cut her off.

"But it looks great, Perenelle. I have nothing to complain about."

Perenelle beamed at his statement, and set about cutting apart the cake.

Fifteen minutes later found Harry with his belly full of chocolate cake, feeling deeply content. The remnants of the meal cleared away, Dumbledore withdrew a thick letter from the folds of his robe.

"I know this may strike you as a surprise, Harry, but you have been accepted into Hogwarts."

Harry gasped overdramatically.

"I can't believe this! Nicolas, Perenelle, did you have any idea that I was a wizard?"

Nicolas shook his head solemnly.

"No, we did not have the faintest idea," Perenelle added.

"Well, I guess this is a surprise to all of us then. I guess I'll have to skip that squib class you two signed me up for."

Harry dropped the shocked veneer, and began to laugh while opening his acceptance letter. He eyed the contents carefully, marking every one in his mind.

"Almost everything in your letter we can order by mail," Nicolas began, "but there are a few items on the list that we will have to go to Diagon Alley to acquire, specifically your wand."

"Are you ever going to tell me who my practice wand belonged to?" Harry asked hopefully.

"Most certainly not," Nicolas cheerfully replied.

Harry groaned loudly, and pantomimed bashing his head off the table, eliciting a mocking laugh from the alchemist. For a moment, he marveled at how comfortable he felt with the Flamels, which provided a very sharp contrast to how he felt upon first arriving. It truly was wonderful to be among people he trusted.

"Stop winding him up, Nicolas," Perenelle warned. "Any time you want to go to Diagon Alley, to get away from this fool, just let me know," she offered, turning her attention back to Harry.

"Is now a bad time?" Harry asked, mostly kidding.

His question prompted laughter from the other three adults, none louder than Nicolas'. As it died down, Dumbledore turned his attention to Harry.

"It is comforting to see the Flamels give up the pretext that they are not teaching you magic."

"Did using my wand to blow out the candles give it away?" Harry asked with mock wide-eyed innocence.

Dumbledore sighed theatrically.

"It did cause me to have my suspicions. What has my senile French counterpart taught you?"

Perenelle inclined her head at Dumbledore's words, smiling in complete agreement.

Nicolas merely shrugged in response.

"Did you expect me to refute the senility claim? I would not be able to deny it with a straight face. Go ahead Harry, tell him what I have taught you, but please leave out the part about poisoning his brackish afternoon tea and scones."

Perenelle covered her face with her hands in resignation, while Harry and Dumbledore chuckled.

"Nicolas tutors me usually twice a week on magic usage, and we go over maybe a spell every two weeks."

"Well," Nicolas broke in, "do you want something done quickly, or correctly?"

Harry rolled his eyes slightly.

"That's probably the most common saying around Flamel manor."

A devious grin broke out onto Dumbledore's face at his claim.

"From what I had heard about Nicolas, doing something quickly is quite com-"

Perenelle cut him off quickly before he could finish the thought.

"Albus, we are certainly not going there today! Besides, such predictability is beyond you."

"Alas," Dumbledore said, "how correct you are. My apologies."

The twinkle in Dumbledore's eye suggested he was less than chastised, but Perenelle didn't pursue it further, instead electing to hide the smile that was clearly threatening to break out upon her face.

"Yeah, moving on," Harry said, "I've pretty much mastered the Protego Shield, the Body-Bind Curse, the Disarming Spell, the Silencing Spell, the Flare Spell, the stunner, the Confundus Charm and Levitation Charm."

Dumbledore's eyebrows raised in surprise at the amount of spells he had learned.

"Very impressive. A great deal of those spells are even unknown to second year students. You have done very well for yourself. Do you feel as if you are ready for Hogwarts?"

"Yes, I really do, sir. Between all the things the Flamels have taught me, and all the books I've read, it feels like I'm prepared."

Dumbldore nodded at this explanation.

"There is little doubt that you have a healthy head start on the curriculum. Admittedly, I wished for you to arrive at Hogwarts with knowledge equal to most of the other first years, as to not lend any credence to the awful rumors circling the Wizing media outlets. Alas, in light of recent events, I agree that it is a good idea for you to possess the skills to defend yourself if necessary."

"I do too, sir."

"Indeed, Harry. Have you given any thought as to how to approach your classmates, with all the vicious rumors that have surrounded your return?"

"Well, not being sorted into Slytherin might help," Harry replied with a grin. The Flamels chuckled at his statement, while a small smile broke out upon Dumbledore's previously serious expression.

"Yes, I have given it some thought, sir," Harry started, "I'll just say that my earliest childhood memories were at the muggle orphanage. If they ask how I got there, I can just say that I was too young to

remember. The Ministry only found me because my accidental magic got out of control, injuring me. Does that sound like it could work?"

Dumbledore stroked his beard slightly, considering Harry's idea.

"Why yes, I do believe that will work. With the simplicity of the story, you will not get caught up in details, which is how most fabrications unravel."

"That's why I'm using the idea, since it gives me some wiggle room. If someone presses me hard enough about why no one could find me, I can always say that I don't really know how the magic works."

Dumbledore inclined his head.

"Very good, but how do you plan on addressing the public perception of your forays into the Dark Arts?"

"By telling the truth, that they're all lies. I'll probably have to be outgoing, talk to people, help them as much as I can. I guess I'll just have to build up a good reputation."

"Are you typically opposed to helping people?" Dumbledore asked, a playful smile upon his face.

"Not at all, sir," Harry said quickly, "but I just like to stay out of other people's business. I like being by myself, where I can do things on my own, at my own pace."

Harry stopped for a second, trying to articulate his thoughts on the matter without sounding antisocial.

"I mean, I don't hate people. I really like the people I've met while here. It's just...I don't feel the need to know other people. There are probably a lot of people at Hogwarts I could get along with, but..." Harry trailed off, not really sure how to say how he felt.

"Am I making any sense?"

Dumbledore chuckled lightly in response to his less than articulate response.

"Relax, Harry. I am not here to judge you. By my own admission, I possessed a similar mindset as a child. All I ask of you is to keep an open mind with regards to potential friendships, as that is largest regret I have with regards to my own childhood."

Harry found himself unable to reconcile the ancient looking man in front of him with a child his age.

"I'm sorry sir, but I really can't imagine you as a kid," Harry replied.

"Speaking of which," Nicolas broke in, "what sort of birthday celebration would this be without presents?"

"Certainly not a party I would want to go to," Perenelle answered. "How about you, Harry?"

"You know, I think some presents would be really nice right now," Harry agreed.

"In that case, it is fortunate I came prepared," Dumbledore remarked. He reached into his robes, and took out a package enclosed in bright red wrapping paper.

"I do feel lucky right now," Harry said, grinning as he began his attack upon the wrapping paper. The brightly colored crimson quickly fell away, revealing a silvery cloak woven from an unknown material. Harry looked at it for a second, trying to figure out what was important about this odd piece of fabric.

Dumbledore's chuckles stole his attention from his investigation.

"Please forgive me; I should not have expected you to know what it was. Drape it over your body."

Harry did as he was told, draping the thin cloth over his body. He noticed that it was quite light, but still wasn't getting the full picture.

"Look down, Harry."

Once again he did as told, expecting to see the silvery material covering his torso, but instead saw nothing.

"Wha..." was all that Harry could articulate before the truth revealed itself.

"This is so great! Thanks a lot, sir!"

Dumbledore smiled widely at Harry's declaration.

"You are certainly very welcome. After all, I am merely returning a family heirloom, as your father lent it to me a long time ago."

Harry stiffened slightly at the words.

"This used to belong to my dad?"

"And his father before him. That invisibility cloak has been in the Potter family for many generations. Aside from the obvious fact of having a high quality magical artifact, I thought you would appreciate having a prized possession of your family."

Harry had very little knowledge of his parents. He had never seen a photo of them, or even knew what they looked like. He knew his hair was reportedly just like his father's, and more than once had been told his eyes were exactly like Lily's. Through this cloak, he finally had a piece of his parents.

"Thank you sir," Harry replied quietly, his voice laden with emotion.

"Now Harry," Nicolas interjected, "I expect you to use that cloak to make life as difficult as possible for Dumbledore. Are we clear on this matter?"

Harry's mood brightened at Nicolas' request.

"Just as long as you take the blame for anything I do," Harry countered.

"That will not be a problem, as being a scapegoat is second nature to me. Perenelle and I also picked you up something, though we have clearly already been upstaged by the annoying sconer."

Harry laughed in response as Perenelle handed him a long, slender package covered in bright green wrapping paper. Upon tearing the paper off, he let out an awed gasp.

Before him lay the Nimbus 2000, the top-of-the-line model produced by the Nimbus Racing Broom Company. The smooth oak of the handle was polished to an almost blinding sheen, making the broom appear to be some sort of heavenly object. Not a single twig in the end seemed out of place, either.

Harry lifted it carefully with his hands, as one would carry a newborn. He had read a great deal about brooms from the Flamel library, but never actually talked to them about owning one, regardless of how great it sounded.

"Would you like to admire it some more, or give it a try?" asked Perenelle, a slightly teasing tone to her voice.

Harry composed himself for a moment's time.

"Trying it sounds good."

After the statement, his composure broke, and he took off sprinting towards the grounds, broom in hand.

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It had an acceleration of one hundred miles per hour in ten seconds. The twigs on the tail were trimmed to aerodynamic perfection. Its slim, sleek construction allowed for flawless handling.

And it was all his.

Beneath the bright sun and cloudless sky of a beautiful day, Harry had wanted to take to the heavens immediately, but the adults had implored him to hold out. Reluctantly, he complied with their wishes.

"Now Harry," Nicolas reasoned, "I know that you are eager to fly immediately, but with such a potentially dangerous activity, which flying clearly is, I would like you to start at the beginning."

Harry nodded impatiently, shifting from foot to foot, wanting to try his new Nimbus 2000 out.

"I do not mean to be a wet blanket, but I thought that first years were not allowed to have their own brooms?" Perenelle asked.

Nicolas looked scandalized at her question, while Harry let out a loud groan of defeat.

"I was sort of hoping that Professor Dumbledore might forget that rule."

The man in question chuckled at Harry's statement.

"Alas, that rule has been rescinded," Dumbledore remarked, looking displeased at the thought.

"How can that be, Albus? That rule is in place for a very specific reason, and has been for hundreds of years."

Dumbledore sighed deeply.

"The battles that I have had to wage every year with the Hogwarts board of governors, now armed with direct support from the Ministry, have become more difficult with each passing year. Alas, I have been forced to choose my battles, and with the most powerful governor on the board wishing for his arriving child to be on the Quidditch team, I had to concede this battle."

Perenelle looked at Dumbledore with pity.

"How much longer are you going to be able to deal with their meddling into your affairs?"

"As long as I can, as it is a war that needs to be fought. I cannot abide the thought of how terrible Hogwarts would become for students if I were not there to act as a shield against the Ministry."

Harry, fully cognizant of the weariness that entered Dumbledore's voice when he spoke of his Headmaster duties, pledged that he wouldn't let the asshole that was pushing around Dumbledore win. Grinning wide, he gazed up at Dumbledore.

"I hope the kid is in the same house as me, so I can take his spot on the team."

The twinkle returned to his eyes at Harry's statement.

"That would indeed be a welcome sight. However, I have spoken enough about unpleasant subjects today."

"Indeed you have," Nicolas broke in, before turning to Harry. "My wife and the scone have stalled you for long enough. Are you ready to fly?"

Harry nodded enthusiastically.

"You looked like you did. Would you like for me to start off with a long-winded explanation of the history behind magical flight?"

Rolling his eyes, Harry turned to Perenelle for help.

"Can you please hit him for me?" Harry begged, prompting her to laugh.

"Barbarians, the lot of you!" Nicolas exclaimed. "I take it you will want to forgo the historical background, then?"

Harry just glared at Nicolas, which wasn't very intimidating coming from an eleven year old desperately holding a smile back.

"Well, that dreadfully pathetic glare has caused me to feel sorry for you, so I will take pity upon you, for now anyway. If you would, Harry, please place the broom on the ground, to the right of you."

Harry parted with the broom, albeit sadly, and placed it on the ground.

"Nearly every magical object in the Wizarding world contains what is referred to as 'reactive magic'. They possess no magic on their own, but when interacting with a wizard, specific effects will occur. Hold out your right arm, palm down, and say 'up'."

"Up!" Harry yelled, following Nicolas' instructions.

As if summoned, the broom leapt into his hand. In his surprise, he almost dropped the broom, eliciting laughs from the assembled adults.

"I didn't think it would be that easy."

"Apparently not," Nicolas conceded, grinning. "If you were a muggle, the broom would not have moved an inch, as they possess no inherent magic to interact with the broom. As it is, the majority of magical children do not have a great deal of confidence in their own ability, which the reactive magic within the broom can sense. During the flying lesson that all first years receive, only a small portion of the students will have their brooms obey at once."

Harry laughed in response.

"Did you know I was confident?" he rhetorically asked.

"Confidence is far too kind a word for your delusions of grandeur, Harry. Go ahead, mount the broom and float a few feet above the ground."

Harry did as told, chuckling all the while. He marveled that despite how uncomfortable it appeared, he could sit without complaint. He had planned to ask Nicolas how he was supposed to control the broom, but to his delight he found it seemed to react to his mental command, his will. With merely a thought, he rose another foot, bringing his altitude to three feet.

Nicolas smirked slightly at Harry's progress.

"I had planned to inform you of how to control the broom, but it would appear that yet again I am forced to scrap parts of my script. Float for a minute or so, get used to the feeling of being in the air."

Harry couldn't even nod. Being up in the air, he felt as if a great pressure were bearing down on him, that he needed to escape. He tried to ignore it, but the feeling increased, leaving him with only one option.

With a shout of triumph, Harry shot up into the air. The pressure immediately disappeared, leaving an all-encompassing euphoria. At thirty feet in the air, he stopped his ascent, and rocketed forward, accelerating madly. Wind whipped by him, trying to slow him down, but the broom was too quick. Sparing a look down, he saw that Perenelle looked slightly worried, while Dumbledore and Nicolas shared identical grins.

After a few minutes of circling the property, Harry regretfully descended. While never before had he experienced such a liberating feeling, he did feel slight embarrassment for so blatantly disregarding Nicolas' instruction. However, upon arriving before Nicolas, he saw no trace of anger upon the alchemist's face.

"Good show, Harry. Without exaggeration, I can say you were clearly born to fly."

"Sorry for going off my own," Harry apologized, still slightly flustered. He still didn't know what came over him, but the closest he could describe it as would be like being caged his entire life, and suddenly having freedom within his reach.

Nicolas waved him off.

"As I said before, you are clearly a natural-born flyer, and had absolutely no chance of resisting the call of the open air."

"Indeed," Dumbledore added, "even your father, who was a gifted Quidditch player himself while at Hogwarts, did not possess such aptitude at your age."

Harry's good mood soared even higher with that news, knowing he was doing something his father also enjoyed and excelled at. Though he knew nothing about his father, in some strange way he felt closer to him.

"If the child whose father changed the rules is in the same house as you," Perenelle remarked, "he is not going to have a chance against you."

Dumbledore smiled wide at the thought, his eyes twinkling madly.

"As an impartial Headmaster, I will not be cheering for any individual student victory.

However," Dumbledore added, his smile gaining a devious edge to it, "internally, I would be ecstatic to see the plans of a certain Hogwarts Governor backfire spectacularly."

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August 8, 1991

In a flash of green flames, Harry arrived to an unfamiliar fireplace and stumbled out, completely disoriented. Perenelle stood a few feet away from him, patiently waiting for his arrival.

"For your first time through the Floo Network, you did well," she complimented, all while dusting off his clothes for him.

"Thanks," Harry replied, gazing around him. The Diagon Alley public floo station was a single, open room comprised of brown and red bricks. An array of six fireplaces lined the far wall, including the one which he had recently vacated.

"Welcome to Diagon Alley," Perenelle said, spreading her arms wide.

"You two, keep it moving!" ordered a aggravated voice from their right. Harry glanced to the source, which proved to be a scowling, bald man in a crimson robe, whose girth was still obvious despite the bulky robes. A strange insignia adorned the front of his robes, comprised of a white 'M' within a larger, black 'M'.

Harry started to open his mouth to tell that boorish man off, but Perenelle grasped his hand, squeezing it once. He got the point, and kept his comments to himself as Perenelle led them past the still-glaring brute.

"What a nice way to welcome people to Diagon Alley," he sarcastically scoffed after they passed the man.

"Yes, he was clearly a cad, but just ignore it. If you stay cross, you will be too angry to enjoy the wondrous sights Diagon Alley has to offer."

They broke out into the sunlight as Perenelle finished her sentence. Despite now being relatively comfortable with magic and the way of life in the wizarding world, he still suffered from a lack of exposure to its society. With his first glimpse into the heart of Diagon Alley, he quickly forgot his vitriol, and drank in all that Diagon Alley had to offer.

Colors so vibrant he expected his eyes to shut down from spectrum overload assaulted him from every angle. Brick buildings crowded

up on either side of him, brightly colored banners hanging down from them. Wizards and witches of all varieties passed in front of him. Stands littered the areas in front of the buildings, selling wares of previously unimaginable content.

However, in between the bustle of the busy Alley, crimson robed wizards stalked with their muscles tense, their eyes watchful.

"The guys in red really ruin the view," Harry remarked.

Perenelle sighed deeply beside him.

"Sad, but true. Minister Fudge created the Ministry Militia to police public areas, in the wake of growing civil unease. The idea was to allow for the Aurors to concentrate on catching known criminals, while making the average citizen feel safer while shopping. I cannot fathom why people would support trading their independence for the illusion of security, but then again Nicolas and myself long ago took our leave from wizarding society."

At his worried glance, she shook her head.

"The first time a child sees Diagon Alley, it should be an event of wonder, of discovery, not being harassed by some poor excuse for a wizard who could not pass Auror training. Just...I am sorry, Harry. Please forgive me for complaining so much to you."

Harry looked up at her.

"We'll just pretend that they're not there."

"A fine idea, Harry. Now, let us hurry along – we must not forget what we came here for."

Earlier that week, Dumbledore and the Flamels had laid out the situation for him. The Ministry was actively looking to take him into custody, tracking down as many leads as they could. While they had no photographic evidence of him, there was always the possibility there was a Ministry internal memo which contained possible descriptions of him, based upon the physical characteristics of James and Lily. Perenelle had originally wanted to take Harry to wizarding Paris, but relented when being assured that every precaution would be taken to assure his safety.

Both Nicolas and Dumbledore were too recognizable to chaperone Harry, but Perenelle could pass undetected, being a rather anonymous figure compared to the other two. Since there were items that he truly needed for Hogwarts, it was decided the risk was worth it. Only several shops would be stopped at, in rigid order of importance. Ollivander's was located right outside Diagon Alley public floo station, which was why they had arrived from that direction.

Staying close to Perenelle's side, they both walked towards the left side of the street, where the reportedly eccentric wandmaker could be found. The building itself was narrow, almost as if it were hiding amongst the other buildings, not wanting to be seen. A large window took up the front of the store, behind which was a single wand on a faded purple cushion. A rickety sign hung above the door read "Makers of Fine Wands since 382 B.C.".

Harry couldn't help but be disappointed in the appearance of the place. For a wandmaker held in such reverence by the wizarding world, from the outside it looked like just another seedy muggle pawn shop.

Perenelle seemed to read his expression as they approached the door.

"I know it certainly does not seem like much, but Ollivander is the most accomplished wandmaker in Europe, and perhaps even the world. Please keep an open mind."

Harry nodded as they entered the shop, which caused a bell from somewhere deep within the back to chime. His first impression was that the shop was consistent with the "disrepair" motif. Mountains of small boxes cluttered the store in towers, in seemingly haphazard, random patterns. Before Harry could investigate further, a man stepped out from behind the stacks of boxes. He was short, with white hair, and eerie, silvery eyes. Harry unconsciously took a step backwards, putting Perenelle between himself and the creepy owner of the disorganized shop.

"I don't believe we've ever met before," the man said to Perenelle, appraising her with his moon-like eyes, "as I did not sell you the wand you hold. However, our family's craft has not changed through

the centuries, and I see that you bear the craftsmanship of one of my ancestors. Has the passage of time been kind to your walnut wand?"

Harry noted that Perenelle seemed to be slightly uncomfortable with the man as well, but was soldiering on.

"With routine upkeep, the wand my great-grandmother passed down has never given me reason for complaint."

"Indeed," Ollivander remarked, as if he knew that Perenelle's story was a fabrication. He stared at her for a moment then nodded sharply, before fixing his unblinking gaze upon Harry. It took all of his willpower to not shuffle or squirm beneath his scrutiny, which lasted for several awkward moments.

"A Potter is always welcome within these walls, just as your father was before you," Ollivander said, shattering the silence. "I remember it as if it were yesterday, when he walked through those very doors and purchased his first wand. Mahogany, eleven inches long, pliable, quite excellent for transfiguration."

Ollivander paused for a moment before resuming his thread of thought.

"You do have your mother's eyes. She favored a willow wand. Ten and a quarter inches long, swishy, nice for charms work. Well, I say your mother favored it – it's really the wand that chooses the wizard, of course."

Harry didn't know how to reply to the strange man, so kept his silence, regardless of how nice it was to hear more about his parents.

"However," Ollivander continued, "certain parties currently within Diagon Alley would not extend the same courtesy, which makes it prudent we conduct our business as quickly as possible."

Perenelle, who had tensed steadily during the conversation, relaxed slightly at Ollivander's suggestion, fully agreeing with the man. Harry was certainly puzzled, but was at least somewhat comforted that Ollivander seemed to be on their side.

Well, slightly comforted.

With no further words on the subject, Ollivander pulled out measuring tape, which began to measure his dimensions on its own. As he was being asked for his wand hand, the tape was measuring the width between his nostrils. Harry was less than convinced it was vital information, but felt an explanation would only unsettle him further. After a few minutes, either Ollivander took all the measurements he needed, or because he felt like he had unnerved Harry enough, the measuring tape dropped to the floor.

"Try this one Mr. Potter," Ollivander urged, pressing a wand into his hand. "Beechwood and dragon heartstring. Nine inches. Nice and flexible. Just give it a wave."

Harry did as ordered, letting out a few small sparks, but there was certainly no connection with the wand, unlike the one Nicolas had given him.

"Very curious, Mr. Potter. This wand is clearly not suited for you, yet there was still some sort of reaction. Curious indeed."

With no further commentary, Ollivander plucked the wand from his grasp and replaced it with another.

"Maple and phoenix feather. Seven inches. Quite whippy. Try it."

He had barely waved it when Ollivander replaced it with another. This process continued itself for quite some time, to the point where Harry lost track of what particular wand he was trying. Oddly enough, Ollivander didn't seem discouraged at all, but rather pleased by the growing piles of boxes surrounding Harry.

"Despite the rather strong reactions you've gotten from some of my wands, I can see that you still have not found the right one. This is all rather strange, Mr. Potter."

Harry felt rather uncomfortable being called strange by Ollivander, but said nothing as the piles grew even taller.

"You're quite the tricky customer, Mr. Potter, but despair not. Try this one, an unusual combination, holly and phoenix feather, eleven inches, nice and supple."

Out of force of habit, Harry was already swishing his hand when the wand was pressed into it. He was wholly unprepared for the blessed, soothing fire that flowed through his arm when the wood touched his palm. Just as Ollivander's face began to grow triumphant, a torrent of flame exploded from the wand, racing towards the prone, helpless wandmaker.

"Flamma congelatus!"

Harry watched in silent horror as the flames struck Ollivander – and passed right through him, without harm. The wandmaker merely withdrew his wand, and extinguished the flames behind him. Harry dropped the wand as if it were hot, and began to blubber an apology at Ollivander.

"You have my thanks for the quick Flame-Freezing Charm," Ollivander said over his shoulder, overriding Harry's apology attempts. "As for you, Mr. Potter, no apology is necessary."

With a final wave, Ollivander vanished the remaining fire, before turning to regard him with eyes still devoid of emotion.

"Occasionally, perhaps once a generation, wizards are born that are vastly ahead of the curve with regards to magical power, thus their reactions to wands are far more violent than normal. These wizards always signal the dawn of a new age."

Ollivander summoned the fallen holly and phoenix feather wand, and pressed it into Harry's slightly shaking hand.

"I remember every wand I've ever sold, Mr. Potter. It so happens that the phoenix whose tail feather is in your wand, gave another feather – just one other. It is curious indeed that you should be destined for this wand when its brother chose the last such wizard that changed the course of wizarding history."

He reached out suddenly, and touched the lightning-bolt shaped scar upon Harry's forehead with his index finger. Harry shrank back from his touch, but Ollivander had already drawn back his hand.

"The same wand that crippled an entire nation, which ushered in this new Dark Age that we still reside in, also gave you this scar."

Thirteen and a half inches. Yew. The wand chooses the wizard, as always. We should expect great things from you, Mr. Potter. After all, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named accomplished great things – terrible things, but still great."

Harry shivered at the words, dreading what was next, but apparently he had nothing left to say. Perenelle, eyeing the wandmaker distrustfully, paid the seven Galleons and motioned for them to leave. Harry thanked the man awkwardly, before rushing to the door as subtly as he could.

"Remember Mr. Potter," Ollivander warned from behind him, causing him to stop in his tracks. "Be very careful. It is not just the brother to your wand that wishes you harm. Please take care of yourself."

"I will, thanks," Harry blurted out as he rushed out the door, not waiting to see if Ollivander had a reply. It occurred to him that if he never saw the creepy wandmaker again, it would be too soon.

As they walked away from the shop, Harry's thoughts were in a whirlwind. They were interrupted by two hands upon his shoulders. He shook his head slightly, to notice Perenelle was standing in front of him, staring down with worried eyes. Her lips were moving, but for some reason he couldn't understand her.

"Huh?" was the only reply he could articulate, his mind still far away.

At his word, she pulled him closer, enveloping him in a tight hug.

"It will be okay," Perenelle reassured him, her head atop his.

Harry nodded automatically. If he and Voldemort shared the same wand core, was a part of the soul fragment that Voldemort hid inside the ring still there?

Perenelle released him slightly, before lowering herself, putting them at equal eye level.

"I know what you are thinking," she began, "but Voldemort is not hiding within you any longer. If there was any trace of that vile monster still within you, then you would not be the wonderful, caring child that I have had the pleasure of watching over the past year."

"Thank you," Harry said quietly.

His thoughts were still turbulent, but Perenelle's words calmed him a bit since they did make sense.

She smiled before giving him a quick final squeeze, and rose to her feet. When her fingers reached down to grasp his own, he offered no resistance as she began to lead them on. Hand-in-hand, they crossed the street, and walked further into Diagon Alley. While normally Harry wouldn't be comfortable with this sort of motherly treatment, with the recent mental thrashing he had received, it was comforting.

Up ahead, on the opposite side of the street, an imposing white marble structure reached to the sky, dwarfing all surrounding buildings. A set of similarly colored marble stairs led up a massive set of bronze doors, which were flanked by two small goblins in a scarlet and gold uniform. The wizarding bank, Gringotts.

"Please, Harry, just look forward, pretend it does not exist," Perenelle urged as they walked past. Harry did as told, tearing his gaze from the majestic sight.

Upon learning his parent's vault was located within Gringotts, Harry had wanted to visit it. He had used the pretext of paying for his school things and the Flamels for their hospitality, but really he wanted mementos of the parents he had never known. The Flamels had struck down the idea immediately, saying they had more gold than they knew what to do with, and could provide. Voices lowering, they had continued, explaining that if he were to access the Potter vaults, there was a high probability the goblins would sell the information to someone within the Ministry.

Nicolas explained that they needed to get Harry on the Hogwarts express without the Ministry having confirmed knowledge of his whereabouts. If the Ministry knew him to be at Diagon Alley, they would try to apprehend him. For that reason, their shopping stops were being kept to an absolute minimum, in order of importance.

With the first stop being without Ministry interference, they could proceed to the next. At the first sign of trouble, however, Perenelle was prepared to use side-along-apparation to get him out of Diagon

Alley, before the Ministry could activate the recently installed Diagon anti-escape wards.

Before he realized it, they were in front of Eeylops Owl Emporium. Hogwarts students were allowed to bring a cat, owl or toad with them to school. While Harry liked cats, he thought an owl might be a bit more useful, certainly much more so than a toad. However, his earlier anticipation for picking out his own animal was dampened by his dreary thoughts.

Without much enthusiasm, he entered the dimly lit shop, where countless owls stood in their perches, regarding him with silent, unblinking eyes. Not really caring, he just pointed out the brightest looking owl in the store, a great snowy owl. When the owner asked what size cage they wanted, Perenelle declined, saying they didn't need one. The owner looked put out by this, but complied, telling Harry to stick his arm out in front of him. The snowy owl immediately flew onto his forearm, and used it as a perch, all while regarding him with wide amber eyes.

"What should I name you, girl?" Harry asked as he exited the shop, Perenelle still behind, paying the proprietor. The snowy owl replied with a low hoot, causing Harry to smile. He wasn't privy to the intricacies of owl speech, but thought it a good sign the owl wasn't ignoring him.

He glanced over to the Eeylops door just in time to see Perenelle exit. She pulled a letter from her robes as she arrived in front of him, and presented the letter to the snowy owl.

"Please deliver this to my husband, Nicolas Flamel. Sadly, its going to be a long flight for you."

The owl gave her a slightly disdainful look, as if Perenelle was questioning her ability. It hooted at Harry once before taking off, grasping the letter in its talons. Perenelle watched the rapidly shrinking owl for a moment, before turning to Harry.

"If we have to apparate away, we could not take the owl with us. In case of trouble, I needed to send the owl ahead of us."

Harry nodded, understanding the idea at once. They started walking back towards the direction they had come from, on the way to their

last stop, Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions. He didn't find it very important, but Perenelle insisted he have nice school robes.

When Harry and Perenelle were twenty feet from the entrance, the front door opened. He couldn't help but notice that this shop looked significantly less shabby than most of the others, providing a sense of professionalism that was strangely lacking throughout Diagon Alley. As he moved closer, a tall, slender woman with long blonde hair stepped out of Madam Malkin's. His eyes were helplessly drawn to her alluring form, which her violet robes couldn't obscure.

She started to turn to her right, and she caught Harry staring at her. Harry winced, expecting a withering glare. Instead, the woman froze, her eyes widened in terror.

Harry stopped immediately, but Perenelle had already noticed something was amiss, and had withdrawn her wand.

"That woman knows who I am, and she's scared of me," Harry blurted out quickly.

Taking no chances, Perenelle took tight hold of his wrist and apparated him away from the mysterious woman, and Diagon Alley itself. They immediately reappeared within the main hall in the Flamel estate.

"Who was that?" Harry asked, his voice shaking slightly.

Perenelle shook her head in response.

"Harry, I do not have the faintest idea."

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Three days after Harry's trip to Diagon Alley, there was barely a trace of the light, relaxed atmosphere that typically filled the Flamel ancestral home. It had been replaced by uncertainty and tension, and seemed to affect everyone in the house. The Flamels, Dumbledore, and Harry sat around the small kitchen table, their focus on a thick folder lying atop the table.

The Daily Prophet had "broken" the story on Harry Potter's trip to Diagon Alley. It had not taken long for "anonymous tips" to alert the

government that it was Perenelle Flamel who had accompanied him to Diagon Alley. Between Harry being heralded as a traitor to England, the Flamels being labeled enemies of the British Ministry, and Dumbledore being bashed for his spirited defense of recently convicted murderer Octavius Pepper, now on his way to Azkaban, the editorial section had been rather busy as of late.

Today, Dumbledore had arrived at Flamel manor to speak to Harry about his options. It had been an anxious three days, with the Flamels wishing to save all dialogue on the matter until Dumbledore had arrived. Once again Harry had found himself in the dark, a problem he intended to sort out immediately.

"Whatever happens," Harry said, breaking the silence, "please don't leave me in the dark anymore. If it has to do with me, I want to know, no matter how bad it is."

"This is a very serious matter," Dumbledore spoke gravely, "and we wish for you to be as well informed as possible before making any decision. We have no intention of hiding anything from you."

Nicolas inclined his head slightly in agreement, but Perenelle still looked reticent.

"Harry, I understand your view on the matter, but some of the topics we plan to delve into tonight...might be rather traumatic for you. Are you sure you really want to expose yourself to this?"

Harry nodded.

"Yes, I am. These are things I'm going to have to deal with sometime, so I want to be prepared."

Perenelle started to interject, but Nicolas placed a hand on her shoulder, causing her to reconsider.

"Well, Harry, after viewing your memories in the Flamels' pensieve, I am certain that the woman you saw outside Madam Malkin's was none other than Narcissa Malfoy," explained Dumbledore.

"Malfoy, eh?" Nicolas interjected. "Throughout the years, they have always been a family of Dark tossers, though I have had no experience with the recent generations. Has anything changed?"

Dumbledore shook his head.

"Narcissa, formerly Narcissa Black, is wedded to Lucius Malfoy, the sole child of Abraxas Malfoy. Lucius was projected as a member of Voldemort's Inner Circle, and only avoided an Azkaban sentence by claiming to be under the thrall of the Imperius Curse."

"Was it possible that he was telling the truth?" Perenelle asked.

"I am afraid not, my dear," Dumbledore answered. "Lucius Malfoy is one of the most powerful politicians in England, possessing considerable sway in its various legislative bodies. It cost him a great deal of gold and influence with the all evidence stacked against him, but he was able to eventually clear his name."

Harry thought this was all grand, but didn't exactly explain why Narcissa would have recognized him. Dumbledore seemed to read his thoughts, as he sighed deeply.

"In my estimation, Voldemort may have entrusted his horcrux to Lucius Malfoy. Not long after the ordeal at Stonewall Orphanage, I paid a visit to Gringotts, and spoke with a few of the employees that I am on good terms with. I found that Lucius Malfoy had submitted a petition to claim the Potter vaults, with the tenth anniversary of your alleged death approaching. Lucius was turned away by the goblins, which would have been an indication that you were still alive, Harry, and thus stood in his way."

"Albus, that is absolutely horrible!" Perenelle exclaimed. "Do you mean to tell me that Lucius sent the ring to Harry, all because he wanted even more galleons?"

Dumbledore nodded, a solemn expression upon his face.

"Sadly, that is exactly my point, as Lucius Malfoy is heartless enough to attempt something so heinous. I do not know what Voldemort told Lucius regarding the ring, but suffice it to say he must have had a compelling reason."

Harry found himself disgusted by Dumbledore's theory. He would gladly trade any amount of gold to have not had that monster within his head.

"According to your theory," Nicolas broke in, addressing Dumbledore, "the horcrux would have known who sent it. Do you think that Harry made a visit to Malfoy Manor?"

"I fear so, old friend. Ever since that day at the orphanage, I have pondered how the horcrux was able to acquire all the materials necessary to mount the attempt upon my life. Perhaps it was less complex than I ever considered, and Voldemort simply had Lucius send him all the supplies needed."

"Where does this leave me?" Harry asked, rather put out that yet another person was after him. It never really seemed to end.

"It did not take long for Narcissa to relay your sighting to her husband, and for him to then discover that the woman with you was Perenelle. The Ministry knows about you because Lucius most likely sold the information to a Ministry insider, gaining himself more favors."

Nicolas continued the explanation.

"Since the Ministry will shortly know where you have been all this time, they will probably try to file an injunction against us, and attempt to seize custody of you, seeing as how we are not your legal guardians."

Harry, incredulous, looked to Dumbledore for conformation.

"Alas, Nicolas is right, Harry," he confirmed.

"I don't believe this!" Harry exclaimed. "Those idiots tried to make me look like the next Dark Lord. I'm not going to let them take me away!"

Perenelle reached over and squeezed his hand.

"Harry, we have no intention of letting that happen," she assured.

"How? I'm going to Hogwarts. Won't the Ministry just take me at King's Cross?" Harry asked, feelings of hopelessness washing over him.

Nicolas and Perenelle exchanged heavy looks, before she addressed Harry's question.

"No, not at all. According to Dumbledore, the over-expansion of the Ministry has left it with few competent employees amidst a sea of mediocrity. We can find a way around any net the Ministry sets up at King's Crossing."

Perenelle stopped for a moment, trying to find the right words. When she resumed, her voice was more quiet, serious.

"What concerns all of us more deeply is what happens once you arrive at Hogwarts, since you are correct, it would be impossible to elude the Ministry while there. If you are to attend Hogwarts, we must put protections into place."

"How?"

"As of right now, Harry, you are a legal English citizen," Nicolas stated, "without a legal guardian. That is currently a perilous state for you, since the Ministry has the laws on their side. However, if you were no longer bound to the constraints of the English Ministry, there would no longer be an issue, as they could not touch you."

"How is that possible?" Harry asked, not understanding what Nicolas was getting at.

"Claude Delacour holds a high position within the French Ministry, and has the Minister's ear. He is willing to help out, and could secure French citizenship for you, putting you under the protection of the French government. Under this scenario, you would attend Hogwarts as an exchange student."

Shock temporarily flooded his senses. Become a French citizen? The whole idea sounded preposterous. Yet, the French Ministry probably wouldn't try to make a pariah of him, a clear benefit. It could solve all his problems.

"That sounds like it might work," Harry admitted, slowly warming to the idea. "What do you think would happen if I did nothing?"

"In all likelihood the Ministry, in accordance with British wizarding law, would place you with your closest blood relations within the wizarding world, the Malfoy family," Dumbledore answered gravely.

Harry's blood boiled at the thought. The Ministry thought it would be okay to take him away from people that cared about him, and stick him with some Dark family that tried to kill him?

No fucking way.

"Okay, I'll do it," Harry answered.

At his reply, the three adults sent uncomfortable looks at one another.

"What's the catch?" Harry groaned.

"Well," Perenelle began hesitantly, "Claude has two conditions that must be met."

"What does he want in return," Harry sighed heavily, resigned to the fact that the only three people in this world that would ever unconditionally help him were seated at the same table.

"Well, it is not what you are thinking. Claude took a liking to you, and does want to help you. He just wants to be assured that you are cared after properly."

Of all he had steeled himself for, that was not the condition he was expecting. That seemed reasonable, as he was already...

Harry's thoughts trailed off as he realized Claude's condition, which explained the uncomfortable looks the adults were exchanging.

"Wait, so Claude will only push the citizenship through if you both apply as my legal guardians?"

The Flamels both nodded nervously, uncertain of what Harry's reaction would be.

"Yeah, that would be great!" Harry exclaimed. "Did you two really think I wouldn't want that?"

Perenelle let out a small sniff, while Nicolas let out a nervous grin.

"I would have figured the thought of another year with me would be enough to drive you away, screaming in terror."

Harry laughed slightly, before addressing the Flamels.

"Seriously, both of you have been the best thing that's ever happened to me. You really seem to care for me, which is something that I can't ever recall having. Why wouldn't I want you two as my parents?"

Perenelle burst into tears at Harry's declaration, unable to hold back the tide any longer. She got up from her chair and came behind Harry, enveloping him in a crushing hug. Nicolas chuckled slightly at Harry's sudden oxygen decrease, and tapped her on the shoulder.

"I am just as elated as you, dear, but perhaps you should let go, while we still have a living child to adopt."

Laughing, Perenelle relinquished her grip, wiping at her wet cheeks.

"What was the second condition?" Harry asked, now able to breathe again.

"Claude mentioned that even if your citizenship goes through, as does all the necessary paperwork to get you into Hogwarts, the Ministry might try to ban you from attending. If, and only if that occurs, Claude would expect you to attend Beauxbatons," Nicolas explained.

"Why does that matter to him?"

"Well, even though you are not well known in France, it would be a publicity boost for their own educational institution, which still lags behind Hogwarts in terms of reputation. Claude thinks that one day you might do great things, so he would like to be able to say that a French school produced that greatness. More than anything, it is a case of national pride."

Nicolas stopped his explanation, and let out a large smile.

"Besides, Harry, what French politician is going to pass up the opportunity to make the English Ministry look like fools?"

Harry laughed in response. He supposed it made sense.

"Harry," Perenelle broke in hesitantly, "have you given any thought to attending Beauxbatons at all? I mean, sorry Albus, but it has been well established that Harry has enemies in England. Is it really the best idea for him to attend Hogwarts?"

Dumbledore inclined his head.

"None taken, my dear. With that being said, I would prefer to be able to keep a close eye upon Harry. Under my watch, I firmly believe I can protect Harry from any Ministry interference."

Harry thought Perenelle's idea was good, but really wanted to attend school where his parents had. Besides, who wants to learn French?

"I still want to try Hogwarts," Harry confirmed, "but you can tell Mr. Delacour that if Hogwarts does not work out, I will definitely transfer to Beauxbatons."

Perenelle didn't look surprised by his decision, but slightly worried.

"At the first sign of trouble, Harry, please let us know. None of us here wants you to get hurt at school."

"Don't worry, I will."

"Well, it appears that is settled," Dumbledore stated, eyes a-twinkle.

Harry couldn't agree more. Despite Voldemort being out there somewhere, a Ministry that wanted to paint him as evil, and the rapid approach of his arrival at Hogwarts, he was struck by the sense that perhaps everything would be alright after all.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Author Notes:

Odd, posting a chapter ahead of schedule. Next one should be coming towards the end of the month, but as always, I'm vulnerable to the vagaries of real life.

This is the final chapter in the pre-Hogwarts Flamel arc. The next arc chronicles Harry's first year at Hogwarts. Coming up is the first Hogwarts chapter, which will include the Sorting. I'm curious to see what House people think he'll be sorted into (Hint: I already know, and tried to hint at it). All guesses more than welcome.

Any comments, suggestions, or criticisms would be deeply appreciated, and inspire me to write as opposed to playing video games. I'll make an effort to answer every review I get.

Thanks to my co-conspirators, darklordmike and Mira Mirth, for their valuable assistance with plotting, characterization, continuity and grammar. Their combined efforts probably save me at least a week of editing every chapter, and are deeply appreciated.

DLP Thanks:

Demons in the Night, Ceebee, Psihary, The Lord of Chaos, Darlm, Luda

Early into the writing of this chapter, a close friend and co-worker of mine took his own life. Despite serving his country faithfully in both Iraq and Afghanistan, once again war took a person whole, and spit them out broken. He deserved far better. While he probably would have ridiculed my time-consuming hobby if he'd known about it, I can think of no better way to honor him than through something I pour so much of myself into.

Rest in peace, Bradford Roche (1981 – 2009). If there indeed are other worlds than this, may they treat you more kindly than this one ever did.

Thanks for reading.

Eight Movement: Condemned to Glory

September 1, 1991

Ministry Militia member Albert Felcher wasn't exactly proud of his current means of employment, but supposed any job was better than no job. A self-admitted career slacker, he had failed out of the Auror academy his first semester. Luckily for him, however, he had done his fair share of partying with Williamson, who had somehow managed to scrape through the academy.

Williamson had alerted him that the Ministry was putting together a security task force. With a few kind words from the now-Junior Auror, Albert found himself picked for the squad. It hardly put him among elite company, but it was employment. Williamson would someday call in the favor, most likely at an inopportune time, but he would worry about it when the moment arrived, and not a second before. He had far more pressing matters at hand.

Cornelius Fudge, Minister of Magic, had been outraged at the announcement that Harry Potter had become a citizen of France. Albert never saw it himself, but whispered retellings of the resulting temper tantrum spread like wildfire throughout the halls of the Ministry. Fudge considered Potter's defection an embarrassment to the government, and had ordered the DMLE to apprehend the boy upon arrival at King's Cross, due process be damned. Considering Harry Potter had sent back his Hogwarts letter with an affirmative, it was a certainty that he would arrive at the station.

Beneath the cover of a Notice-Me-Not charm, Albert's orders were to observe all incoming traffic via the main entrance to Platform Nine and Three Quarters. At three hours before the scheduled Hogwarts Express departure, he had been ordered to set up, should Potter and any accomplices arrive. He wasn't exactly thrilled to be awake so much earlier than usual, but didn't have much of a choice in the matter.

Scanning the crowd of muggles closing in on all sides, he felt distinctly unclean. They were all just so...inferior to wizards. And the stupid clothes they wore!

After a half hour of watching the entrance, he noticed two muggle figures moving closer to the barrier, a mother and a son. The son

was small, thin, almost too much so for a first-year. He was wearing typically muggle attire, blue pants and a black shirt, with unruly blond hair poking out from under his black Newcastle United hat. He was lugging a large, brown trunk on wheels, with an owl cage perched perilously atop it.

The mother had the exact blond hair of her son, and was dressed in similar blue pants as her son, and a navy blouse. She seemed distinctly uncomfortable and nervous, which was reported to be common among the parents of mudbloods.

The boy approached the barrier slowly, his bright blue eyes wide in anticipation. Closing his eyes, he reached out with his foot, as if testing how cold a lake was. His eyes flew open with surprise upon finding no resistance.

Merlin, mudbloods could be so stupid.

Armed with newfound confidence, the boy marched through the barrier, pulling the trunk behind him. The mother followed shortly thereafter, trepidation written clearly upon her face.

Once they vanished, Albert quickly followed after them. According to the description given out to all militia members patrolling the platform, Harry Potter had black hair, green eyes, glasses and a large lightning-bolt shaped scar upon his forehead. So far, the only thing that matched up was the small, thin build of the boy. However, in the event that the Potter spawn attempted to use any magical glamour or concealment, the platform had been warded against all types of magical disguise.

Readying his wand by his side, he stepped through the barrier. The boy looked exactly as he had before, and was currently staring at the bright red train in wonder. In fact, both the child and mother seemed completely unchanged. From a distance, it appeared that they were just gazing about in wonder at the many perfectly average sights that surrounded them. With a sigh, he turned away from the ignorant mudbloods and moved back to his former post.

After all, the Potter brat could be arriving at any moment.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

"And please do not forget, your Hogwarts letter clearly told you not to perform magic over the summer. So try not to flaunt your magical skill, it being illegally developed."

Harry grinned at Perenelle's reminder.

"I'll try. Just don't forget that a simple cleansing spell will get all that off."

She took a lock of her recently dyed blond hair between her fingers, looking at it with distrust. While cosmetic spells were second nature to her, muggle products were still a mystery.

"I certainly hope so, Harry."

Propping his trunk up against the door frame, he used his newly unburdened hands to hug Perenelle.

"Thank you for everything."

Harry saw tears in her eyes before she returned his embrace, squeezing tightly.

"Stay safe, Harry, and good luck with your first year. You are going to do great there, I know it," she whispered into his ear, her voice heavy with emotion.

He let go first, and began to drag his trunk onto the train. Raising his arm, he gave a final wave to Perenelle, which she returned. Turning back to his trunk, he set it on its wheels, and rolled it to the back to the train. Hedwig screeched in displeasure with being jostled.

"It's okay, girl," Harry reassured, "we're almost in the compartment, where I can let you out."

She quieted at his words, and he resumed moving toward the back of the train. He settled upon the last door, and entered. Working quickly, he shut the blinds, cutting off the morning rays of sunshine. In the relative darkness, he withdrew his wand from his trunk, and cast cleaning charms on his face and hair. He felt the flesh colored-makeup disappear from his face, but couldn't really see his reflection well in the window. After placing his glasses back on, the world sharpened, revealing that his hair was back to its natural color.

He breathed a heavy sigh of relief, as the hardest part was over. The Ministry hadn't yet secured the right to search compartments on the Hogwarts Express. If they had, Harry may have had to seriously consider attending Beauxbatons.

With the most important part complete, he stowed the hat into his trunk, and raised it onto the racks. Hedwig screeched again, getting impatient with how long it was taking to free her. Harry conceded to his snowy owl's wishes, and opened the window for her. Hedwig soared out of it, letting out a single hoot of gratitude as she exited the compartment. With all the necessary steps out of the way, Harry opened the blinds again, and just sat, letting the warm rays wash over him.

As the morning advanced, the bustle of the growing crowd grew louder, but no one bothered Harry. Starting to get bored, he pulled the first-year Charms textbook, and started reading. After roughly an hour, the door opened again.

In the doorway was a very short, blond girl in white jeans, and a red top. She sized him up for a moment with her vivid blue eyes, her eyes lingering on his clothes. She nodded once, as if resolving some internal question, and began to drag her stuff in, talking while she did so.

"All of the other compartments were full, so I do hope you don't mind if I share yours."

Harry smiled to himself, guessing that he really didn't have a choice, as she was already stuffing her trunk into the overhead compartment.

"No, it's alright."

The girl nodded without turning around, still arranging her trunk. Once done, she wiped her hands on the front of her pants, before sticking a hand out to him.

"I'm Tracey Davis. It's nice to finally meet another muggleborn," she stated, her face neutral.

Harry laughed at her statement, prompting a frown from the girl. Before he could explain himself, however, the door opened again,

slowly, cautiously. Beyond was an almost-terrified looking chubby boy with brown hair, dressed in black wizarding robes. Oddly, Tracey eyed them with distrust. Harry found himself wondering what kind of chip this girl had on her shoulder.

"Is there any room in here?" the boy asked timidly, staring hopefully at the two other children. Tracey looked at him, and raised a single eyebrow. In wake of no immediate response, the boy put his head down, and began to back away, inciting Harry to speak up. Harry found himself feeling sorry for him, as he bore the countenance of a whipped puppy.

"Hey, don't go," Harry implored, before spreading his arms wide. "There's plenty of room in here."

The boy looked up at his claim, his face hopeful. Encouraged, he dragged his trunk forward into the compartment. Harry helped him stow his trunk, earning a stuttered thanks in return.

"Thanks for letting me in here," he said earnestly, "I'm Neville Longbottom. Who are you guys?"

"Tracey Davis," the girl offered with a slight nod.

Harry, mentally preparing himself, went next.

"My name's Harry Potter."

Neville openly gasped, while Tracey's look of indifference turned to shock. After a few moments of silence, Harry decided it was getting a bit awkward.

"Please, I'm not going to recruit you for my dark crusade. That will be after the Sorting."

Tracey let out a small laugh, while Neville looked concerned. Harry groaned internally, lamenting having to deal with his unearned reputation so quickly.

"Not everyone believes the Daily Prophet," Neville reassured earnestly, "my grandmother always said they only said those bad things because you wouldn't become the Ministry's mascot."

It was the last thing he expected the downtrodden-looking boy to say, but he found himself comforted by the words, grateful, even if the insight of Neville's grandmother probably wasn't common.

"Thanks," Harry replied.

The door opened again after his comment, revealing a brunette girl with bushy, slightly frayed hair, in muggle attire.

"I can't believe how loud and childish the rest of the train is! Running up and down the halls, throwing stuff at each other! This is the only compartment quiet enough for someone to think in," the girl claimed, slamming her trunk down in the center of the compartment.

Tracey, well aware of the irony of the girl's statement, sent a death glare at her, which she caught.

"My, I'm the loud one now, aren't I?" she asked, receiving a slow nod from Tracey. "Sorry for my rude entry. Is it okay if I stay in this compartment?"

Tracey didn't look exactly thrilled with the prospect, but Harry didn't really have a problem with it.

"Well, since you asked nicely," Harry answered, "I think we might have some room for you."

"Thank you," she answered, smiling. Harry and Neville helped her hoist up her trunk, before sitting down.

"I'm Hermione Granger," the girl offered. Neville went next, followed by Harry.

Hermione's eyes widened with shock at his identity, but she was quickly overcome by excitement.

"I saw your name all the time in the reading I did after finding out I was magical. Every book seemed to have a different opinion on you."

"Yeah, life hasn't been much different," Harry remarked, chuckling slightly. He glanced over to Tracey, who still hadn't introduced

herself. She had stopped sending pointed glances in Hermione's direction, but still seemed slightly displeased.

"I can't believe that there was an entire world under our noses the entire time!" Hermione exclaimed. "I never would have believed someone who told me that magic is real, and here I am going to a school of magic!"

At Hermione's exclamations, a smirk appeared upon Tracey's face.

"What?" Hermione asked, perplexed by Tracey's reaction. The girl in question shrugged in response.

"I don't know, I guess I'm just not as excited as you. I mean, it's really neat to have magic be real, but I feel so behind all the other magical kids, that I don't know if I'll ever catch up."

Harry couldn't help but feel that Tracey was implying something else, but didn't know what her point was. He thought it was a good time to speak up.

"My mom was a muggleborn. From what I know, she went on to become Head Girl, the highest honor for a Hogwarts student."

Tracey didn't exactly seem swayed by his argument, as her expression didn't change.

"That must have taken a lot of hard work. It just seems that the wizarding world is very unkind to muggleborns, and doesn't really want them here."

Hermione started in with a retort, but Tracey cut her off.

"Were you able to practice magic over the summer, once you found out you were magical?"

Hermione shook her head.

"Of course not; it said in the Hogwarts letter that we couldn't do magic away from school. Isn't that for all younger children, though?"

Tracey snorted.

"It should be, but how would the Ministry be able to tell between the magic of adults and children, if its only spells that are tracked?"

Hermione was at a loss, unable to come up with a retort to Tracey's claim. During the exchange, he noticed that Neville was looking increasingly uncomfortable at Tracey's words, but hadn't spoken up. Discreetly, he raised an eyebrow at Neville, who shook his head slightly in response, reluctant to offer a counterpoint.

The large gap between the two worlds was something he had never really considered before. With the speed and skill he displayed at the Flamels, it was almost a certainty that during his missing past, he had been raised in the wizarding world.

"Neville, you've been in the wizarding world your entire life, right?"

The boy jumped slightly at being addressed, and looked uneasy with having the attention of three other people upon him. After a moment, he nodded slowly.

"Is what Tracey's saying true?"

Hurt flashed across Neville's face at being put on the spot, causing him to close his mouth and begin a staring contest with the floor.

"Neville," Harry spoke softly, "we're not here to judge you, we just want someone who's actually grown up in this strange world to let us know how it really is."

Encouraged slightly by Harry's words, he looked up, directly at Tracey.

"In some ways, I guess you're right, but muggleborns and wizarding children obviously had really different childhoods, so why would they have the same opinion on things?"

"Well, obviously," Tracey replied, "but it just seems like the wizarding world doesn't want muggleborns to succeed."

Neville shook his head.

"Yeah, there are some old families that still don't like muggleborns, but there's just as many other families that have no problem with muggleborns."

Harry, glad to have Neville contributing to the conversation, followed up on his point.

"The Potter family is one of the oldest, most respected in Britian, and they have always stood for equality in the wizarding world."

Harry noticed that Neville looked distinctly pleased to have his support. Glad that he was making a positive impression upon Neville, he continued on.

"Like I said before, my mother was born in the muggle world. She was the best Potions student in her class, better than any wizard, and was Head Girl. She had to work hard at it, but she beat out all the other girls that were born in the wizarding world. Dumbledore also said that if she lived, she could have made a big difference in the wizarding world."

His paused for a moment, considering how to frame the important part.

"Voldemort, the most powerful Dark Lord ever, went after my parents himself. He was so scared of a muggleborn witch that he went after her, which is something he almost never did, since he usually just sent his servants after people he wanted dead."

Complete silence followed his story. It was embellished slightly, but Harry wasn't above using propaganda to drive his point home. He had an idea why Tracey had gone into Hogwarts with a slight bit of fear and apprehension for the wizarding world, but didn't want to put her on the spot in front of others.

"Harry, what world did you grow up in?" Hermione asked.

"The muggle world. I don't know what happened to cause Voldemort's fall, but my first memories were of the London orphanage I grew up in. Eventually Dumbledore found me there, and introduced me to a wizarding family. For the past year I've lived in the magical world."

"I guess that's why the Ministry is so mad at Dumbledore," Neville remarked, "since he refused to give them any information about you."

Harry nodded in response.

"Your grandmother knows what she's talking about. The Ministry did want to use me as a mascot, and then probably stick me with the family of some high-ranking official."

Harry chuckled to himself before continuing.

"One of the few things the Ministry is good at is kicking other people in the shins. They didn't like me hiding from them, so they had the Daily Prophet start a campaign against me."

"That's awful!" Hermione exclaimed, "using a smear campaign against a child. What kind of people run this Ministry?"

"I don't blame you for becoming a French citizen," Neville offered, shaking his head. "My entire family is not happy with the Ministry, they say they're a disgrace and embarrassment to England. I'm the only child in the family, so I hear a lot of political talk at family gatherings."

Considering that Neville had never mentioned his parents, Harry hypothesized that he must have been raised by his grandparents. He didn't claim to know the circumstances, but whatever happened to him, it seemed to kill his self-confidence. Whatever the case was, Harry took an immediate interest in Neville, and planned to help him whenever possible. With all the rumors surrounding him, true friends would probably be in short supply, and it seemed a few acts of kindness would go a long way.

Also, it probably wouldn't hurt to have a contact in Hufflepuff.

Hermione and Tracey shared similar stories, each leading relatively normal lives until their Hogwarts letters arrived. While Tracey hadn't exactly become talkative, she seemed to relax slightly the longer she was among the other three children.

Not longer after, a woman pushing a cart full of sweets came by. Before anyone else spoke up, Neville promptly pulled a large

quantity of coins from his pockets, and purchased enough food from the cart to stage a feast.

"I don't think I can eat all this," Neville said with a smile, "anyone want to help me?"

This inspired laughter in the compartment, as they all tore into the assorted sweets, thanking Neville as they did. He was slightly embarrassed by the thanks, evidenced by the rising color in his cheeks, but seemed pleased nonetheless. With a hint of sadness, Harry wondered if Neville had any friends growing up.

Ten minutes after eating, feeling slightly sluggish from the abundance of sweets, the assembled group heard footsteps outside the compartment. Without a single knock, the door swung open. Beyond was a pale blond boy, flanked by two huge, hulking bodyguards the size of boulders. The one in front, the apparent leader, wore an expression equal parts apprehension and anger.

Harry sighed, wondering if today would be his first example of the wizarding bias against him.

"Well, well, if it isn't the traitor to England," the blond boy sneered, his nose upturned.

"Um, do I know you?" Harry asked, making an effort to be somewhat civil.

"If you knew anything about our world, you would," the unwanted visitor replied with a smirk.

"Well, since I don't, why don't you just leave?" Harry suggested, already sick of the annoying ponce.

"Why should I?" the boy challenged.

"Because no one invited you, or really wants you here," Harry answered, rapidly tiring of the posturing.

The two goons had no visible reaction, but the blond looked slightly flummoxed. Neville laughed at the tables being turned so effortlessly, causing the blond forget about Harry for a moment.

"It's very sad that some families have no pride," the boy noted, examining his fingernails, as if Neville was unworthy of his attention. "They'll associate with anyone, even Mudbloods and traitors."

The comment angered Neville, who began to turn red.

"You know," Harry began, "I'd much rather be part of Neville's family, instead of whatever poof family you're part of."

"You better remember, it's the Malfoys that run this world," the boy spat, livid.

At the mention of the name, Harry went still. The annoying, prancing idiot was a member of the family that tried to kill him, probably Lucius' son. His first instinct was to curse the boy, but he quickly discarded the idea. If he attacked the fool, Harry would have little chance of discovering what the Malfoy child knew of the indiscretions of the elder Malfoys.

"You know, I can't tell, are you a boy or a girl? You just look so much like your mother that I'm not sure anymore."

"I do not!" Draco exclaimed, "and how would you know? You don't know my mother!"

The boy was completely right about Harry not knowing his mother, but he didn't have to know that. He calmed slightly at the answer. If Narcissa had ever mentioned anything about Harry to her son, he wouldn't be surprised that Harry knew something about his mother.

"Did I strike a nerve?" Harry asked, drawing laughs from the rest of the compartment. Yet again, the two goons behind the blond only had looks of confusion upon their faces.

"You better watch yourself, Potter," the boy threatened, pointing at Harry. "Hogwarts has a way of weeding out those of poor breeding."

Harry laughed at the pale threat.

"Is this coming from the guy who's parents are cousins?"

"Shut up, Potter!" Draco yelled, before storming off. His two goons looked befuddled for another moment, before slowly walking off.

There was silence in the compartment, before Hermione spoke up.

"Harry, I saw your face when that boy said his name. Why did the name 'Malfoy' make you so angry?"

Harry wasn't quite prepared to answer that one truthfully, so he turned to his side.

"Neville, what do you know about the Malfoy family?"

"Well, the Malfoys are traditionally a Dark family, and sided with You-Know-Who during his rise to power. After You-Know-Who disappeared, the head of the family, Lucius, Draco's father, said he was under the Imperius Curse. All of the Light families, like mine, said he was guilty and lying, but he used his money and influence to stay out of Azkaban."

Harry thanked Neville for his explanation, before turning to Hermione.

"Is there a single reason why I should like a Malfoy?"

His question caused the rest of the compartment to laugh. Harry took an exaggerated bow in response to the laughter.

"I rest my case."

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Upon exiting the train, Harry found himself the clear center of attention. Countless pairs of eyes tracked his progress, the majority tinged with the specter of fear. He sighed inwardly, but was well-aware of how quickly information traveled amongst kids, and knew being discovered was inevitable. At least it hadn't been the Ministry that had discovered him.

In the chill of the night, each breath Harry exhaled was clearly visible. Looking around, he noticed many of the other kids rubbing their hands together in an effort to generate some warmth.

"Perfect night for the year's first cold night, eh?" Harry sarcastically remarked.

"Really, t-thanks, H-Harry," Tracey answered, her teeth chattering slightly. "I wasn't trying to keep my m-mind off the c-c-cold or anything."

Hermione shivered visibly.

"This is not well thought-out. I read in 'Hogwarts, A History', that there's supposed to be carriages to take us to the castle, but I don't see anything," she remarked.

"I don't know," Neville said, "it's so dark out here. Maybe there are carriages, we just can't see them."

Harry turned to reply, but a point of light over Neville's shoulder caught his attention. Materializing out of the darkness was a bobbing lamp, far above the heads of the students.

"Firs' years! Firs' years over here!"

Like moths towards a candle, the first year contingent cautiously approached the source of the booming voice. As they drew closer, the owner of the voice came into focus. It was an extraordinarily large man, easily three times taller than any of the children. Above the wild tangle that was his beard, he was beaming.

"C'mon, follow me – any more firs' years? Mind yer step, now!"

The giant man continued to call out for more first years as they began to follow him down a steep, narrow path. With the slippery walkway, and the murky abyss spreading out from both sides of the path, there were not many words exchanged. Harry thought that concentrating on not falling into the bottomless pits on either side of him was worthy of his full attention.

"Where are the carriages?" Hermione moaned, not exactly thrilled with the combination of cold weather and a trek through the darkness.

As the ground had started to level out, Harry risked a reply.

"It's probably a tradition for first-years to enter the school a different way."

"Righ' ye are!" the giant called over his shoulder. "Yeh'll get yer firs' sight o' Hogwarts in a sec, jus' round this bend here."

As Harry rounded said bend, he began to understand why first year students went this way.

Calling the sight majestic would be an understatement of criminal magnitude. The path opened out onto a large vista which contained a sizeable lake, the starlight throwing the churning, heaving body into clear view. Overlooking the large lake, like a vigilant sentry, was Hogwarts.

Perched atop the side of a mountain at the other end of the lake, the majestic castle seemed to be endless. Countless towers and spires reached up to the heavens, while even more windows glowed with candlelight.

So enraptured was he with the sight that he barely perceived getting into a boat with his three cohorts, and traveling across the lake.

When Hogwarts was spoken of, Harry had always thought of it as a school, maybe someplace where he could re-connect with his parents, through the path they took to adulthood. Upon seeing its majesty, however, he realized there was far more to it. This was more than a mere castle. This was thousands of years of magical learning, each generation leaving their mark upon the school, the nexus of the world's magical knowledge.

Lost in thought, he jumped when the boat bumped softly against a solid surface. Looking up, he saw they were in some type of underground harbor, probably beneath the school. He jumped over the side, landing softly on the rocky ground.

"I'm finally here," Harry said softly to himself, in awe that a year ago he had been upon death's doorstep.

"Ar yeh're," the giant said to him, chuckling slightly. "Yeh were righ' 'bout the firs' years. What's yer name, lad? Yeh look familiar, but I can' 'member how. I'll 'ave the professors give yeh a few points to whatever house you end up in."

Noticing most of the other first years had already begun to ascend the stone stairs, Harry answered, preparing himself for any result.

"Harry Potter, sir."

"Blimey!" the giant exclaimed, slapping his forehead. "Tha's who it was! Yeh do look jus' like yer father, don't yeh?" The giant immediately stuck out his hand, which looked like it could crush his head with minimal effort. Gingerly, he tried to pump the hand.

"I'm Rubeus Hagrid, Hogwarts groundskeeper. Yeh parents were fine, fine people, Harry. I don' listen to that rubbish in the papers, if Dumbledore says yer good, then that's good enough for me."

With a clap on his back almost hard enough to knock him to the ground, Hagrid smiled fondly at him, before climbing the stairs himself.

Harry was quite relieved that at least two of the staff didn't have any grudges against him, but felt even more comforted by the kind words spoken about his parents by Hagrid.

He ascended the stairs, where the assembled children waited, with Hagrid standing in front of a large, oak door. Turning, he looked back down the stairs.

"Everyone here?"

Receiving no comment, Hagrid raised a gigantic fist and knocked three times upon the castle door, which opened before the echo of the final strike faded away. In the doorway was a tall, dark-haired witch with square glasses, and a face so rigid it could have been carved from stone.

"The firs' years, Professor McGonagall," said Hagrid.

"Thank you, Hagrid. I will take them from here."

Beyond the witch was an entryway that was even larger than the one at the Flamel home. The firelight from the countless torches set into the stone walls didn't even reach the ceiling, leaving it in murky darkness. A marble staircase directly in front of them stretched upwards, with countless other paths branching off of it.

The stern professor led them forward, past a large doorway on the right, from which emanated hundreds of voices. Wordlessly, she led them into a small chamber off the entryway, where they crowded in. Harry didn't think it was that grand of an introduction, considering the nervous looks surrounding him. He couldn't help but notice other kids shying away from him, as if he was infectious.

"Welcome to Hogwarts," Professor McGonagall began. "The start-of-term banquet will begin shortly, but before you take your seats in the Great Hall, you will be sorted into your houses. The Sorting is a very important ceremony because, while you are here, your house will be something like your family within Hogwarts. You will have classes with the rest of your house, sleep in your house dormitory, and spend free time in your house common room."

Paying careful attention to the woman, he noticed her expression darken slightly, as if she had swallowed something distasteful.

"The Ministry of Magic wishes all of you the best, as you will be the future leaders of tomorrow. They ask that you help usher in a new age of peace and prosperity for the wizarding world."

The last words seemed to be forced out. Turning his head, Harry saw that Hermione and Tracey had picked up on the professor's obvious distaste for the final words, which seemed like they were forced upon her. With a small smile, he realized that Dumbledore and Hagrid weren't the only members of the Hogwarts staff not pleased with the Ministry.

McGonagall's expression cleared as she began to explain about the separate houses, and how Hogwarts worked. She implored the children to smarten themselves and to stay quiet until she returned, before leaving the chamber.

Despite the professor's request, voices immediately rang out, asking questions aloud about the nature of the Sorting.

"How do you think they sort the houses?" Tracey wondered aloud. Harry had no answer, nor did anyone else. After the initial inquiries went unanswered, they all quieted down, save for Hermione.

"I've read about all the spells, but do they want us to do any, or will it be all theory, but they have to fair, because I haven't done any spell and how can they expect us to do something that we've nev-"

Harry placed his hand upon the babbling girl's shoulder, quieting her.

"Don't stress out, Hermione. Most of us haven't done magic before, so it can't be too complex."

She gave him a grateful smile as he removed his hand, just in time to catch a score of white, translucent figures stream through the wall, in deep conversation.

"You know, we really should give Peeves a second chance," a fat little monk was saying.

"While normally I would consider the thought mad, my dear Friar, you may be right. If we afford him certain privileges, then perhaps he may con – I say, what are you all doing here?"

The ghost stopped mid-sentence, noticing the first years.

"Summer vacation was starting to get boring," Harry quipped, before he could stop himself. He groaned internally, temporarily forgetting Nicolas wasn't around any more to banter with. To his surprise, the ghost, adorned in a ruff and tights, threw back his head and laughed, causing it to fall backwards over his back, exposing a neck that had been roughly hewn through, leaving only a narrow strip of flesh connecting it to the head.

Did I just kill a ghost with laughter?

"Bollocks!" the ghost exclaimed, reaching back and attempting to set his head straight. The monk began to point at him, openly laughing.

"Well done, Sir Nicolas! Another year, another generation of students you've managed to embarrass yourself in front of. Better luck next year, chap!" Turning to the students, the ghost waved to them jovially. "Hope to see you in Hufflepuff," the Friar said enthusiastically, "my old house, you know."

The apparently headless ghost, righting itself, glanced at Harry.

"You cheeky scallywag! I certainly expect to see you in Gryffindor."

"Move along now," said a sharp voice. "The Sorting Ceremony's about to start."

McGonagall wasted no time upon returning, immediately forming them into a line, and marching them into the Great Hall.

To Harry's delight, Hogwarts hadn't run out of ways to amaze him. The Great Hall was just as splendid as the other sights he'd seen so far. It was lit by thousands of candles, all floating in midair over four long tables, at which the rest of the students were placed. At the top of the hall was a slightly elevated table, perpendicular to the rest, where the staff was seated. Upon all the tables were gleaming plates, goblets and dinnerware, all forged from a golden-colored ore. Looking up, Harry saw that the hall opened up directly into the night sky, the stars shining brightly above.

Before he could inspect further, McGonagall led them forward, lining them up in front of the staff table, placing them in front of the sea of adolescent faces. In front of them, McGonagall dragged a wooden stool, and placed upon it a pointed wizard's hat, which was patched, frayed and extremely dirty.

"Magic tricks, anyone?" Harry muttered under his breath, earning a nervous giggle from Tracey and a slight glare from Hermione. Neville, in apparent terror, was oblivious. Without warning, the hat's brim opened wide and began to sing, speaking of itself and the various houses.

The applause following the song was deafening. Harry only heard a male voice instruct that all they had to do was try on the hat. It wasn't quite ideal, as he would have preferred some sort of magical demonstration, but admitted to himself that wasn't too fair of a test at this point in time.

Professor McGonagall stepped forward, holding a roll of parchment in her hands.

"When I call your name, you will put on the hat and sit on the stool to be sorted," she said. "Abbott, Hannah!"

A terrified girl with blond pigtails stumbled forward to the stool, and sat upon it, placing the hat upon her head. It fell down over her eyes, but before she could adjust it, the hat made its decision.

"HUFFLEPUFF!" shouted the hat.

The table on the right cheered and clapped as Hannah ran over, the Friar waving jovially at her.

"Bones, Susan!"

Harry could have sworn Nicolas had mentioned the name Bones before, as an English ally. An old Light family, perhaps?

"HUFFLEPUFF!" shouted the hat again, prompting the auburn-haired girl to run off to the table, placing herself next to Hannah. Harry only hoped that Neville got an equally warm reception upon being Sorted there.

"Boot, Terry!"

"RAVENCLAW!"

The applause came from the table second from the left this time, Terry's new housemates standing to shake hands with him.

"Brocklehurst, Mandy" also went to Ravenclaw, but "Brown, Lavender" became the first new Gryffindor, prompting an explosion of cheers from the far left of the hall.

"Bulstrode, Millicent", a tall, thick girl with lank, black hair and a sour expression became a Slytherin. While certainly jaded by Voldemort's placement into Slytherin, even Harry had to admit they looked like a bunch of mean motherfuckers. He imagined he'd never shed his Dark Lord reputation if he were sorted there.

"Crabbe, Vincent" was also sorted into Slytherin after a short deliberation, without a visible change in expression from the hulking boy. Harry began to suspect that the blank look on Crabbe's face mirrored the contents of his skull.

"Davis, Tracey!"

The blond girl moved away from Harry, nervously chewing upon her bottom lip. She gingerly placed the hat upon her head. Mere moments after placing it upon her head, it came to a decision.

"SLYTHERIN!"

A crestfallen Tracey listlessly placed the hat back upon the stool, before moving to the nearly silent table. She picked as far away from the other students as she could manage, a look of pure misery upon her face. Harry sent her an encouraging smile, as his heart went out to her. Slytherin was the only house that almost openly discriminated against muggleborns. Tracey tried to return his smile, but it ended up looking more like a grimace.

Goyle, Malfoy's other bodyguard, was also placed into Slytherin, looking slightly annoyed. The reception from the Slytherin table was warm, so perhaps the hat said something to Goyle. Laughing to himself, Harry imagined how difficult it must have been for the hat to discern between Crabbe and Goyle.

Goyle leered once at Tracey before sitting down. Harry wasn't surprised she was sorted there, with her strong sense of suspicion and self-preservation, but still found it unfortunate.

"Granger, Hermione!"

With a determined glance, Hermione ran to the stool, jamming the hat onto her head.

"GRYFFINDOR!" shouted the hat.

Harry found himself surprised. With her professed affinity for books and learning, he figured she'd be a lock for Ravenclaw. He was glad to note she was welcomed warmly by her new housemates. He wondered if he too would be sorted into Gryffindor, as his parents were before him.

As unrealistic as it was, he had harbored hope that all of the people in his compartment would share the same house. Oh well.

"Longbottom, Neville!"

With increasing interest, Harry noted that Neville's decision was by far the longest, taking at least a minute.

"GRYFFINDOR!" the hat shouted eventually, eliciting a gasp of shock from Neville.

Harry shook his head, grinning. So much for having that contact in Hufflepuff. His predictions weren't doing so hot today.

"Malfoy, Draco!"

With a snort, Harry wondered why they'd even bother. His viewpoint was vindicated when the ponce was sorted into Slytherin as soon as the hat touched his blond head. Newly sorted, Draco strutted over to the table to a warm reception, seating himself between Crabbe and Goyle with a smug expression upon his face.

"Potter, Harry!"

A pin drop could have made an echo as Harry made his way to the hat, the transition to total silence so sudden it disconcerted him. The different stares, of fear, anger, curiosity were almost physical in their intensity. With a deep breath, he placed the ratty hat upon his head.

"Harry Potter, eh?" a jovial voice inside his head noted. "It's good to finally meet the person who got rid of that pesky hypocrite, Voldemort."

"I don't remember any of that," Harry said aloud.

"Harry, we can speak inside your head," the voice pointed out exasperatingly. "No one would remember anything at that age, but I can see your entire life. Where do you truly think you belong, Harry?"

Nicolas had mentioned Harry would probably make a fine Ravenclaw, while Perenelle said he had the heart of a Gryffindor. Harry didn't really have a preference.

The hat chuckled.

"I'll see for myself."

After a few moments of silence, the hat spoke again, all traces of good humor gone, its voice barely above a whisper.

"You poor, poor child. No one should ever have to go through what you have."

Harry's thoughts began to race. This thing could see through the locked vault! Before he could ask anything, the hat continued on, the pitch of its voice rising.

"Why did they take you?" it asked, more to itself than Harry. "Why did they choose you? Are you truly one of the Fireborn?"

Fear clenched Harry's heart with a vise-like grip.

"I don't know what you're talking about!" Harry insisted in his head.

"Do you even know what you are?"

At yet another question, Harry lost his patience.

"I don't know ANYTHING about myself!" Harry yelled aloud, silencing the mounting whispers in the Great Hall. The hat was silent at his outburst, before continuing in a low, sorrowful voice.

"The magic binding me won't allow me to convey specific information to students during the Sorting. Despite all that has happened to you, you have still managed to stay a good person, but people aren't always going to see that. They'll see the phantom that the media has conjured, and Harry, you're going to need to be tougher than imaginable to triumph over your undeserved reputation. Godric forgive me for placing a fierce, true heart such as yours in SLYTHERIN!"

Harry jumped up at the hat's decision, livid. How the fuck was he ever supposed to convince people he wasn't a Dark Lord from Slytherin!

Get a fucking grip, Harry! It's done with, deal with it. You have no other options, so stop your fucking whining and get yourself under control.

Harry took a deep breath, which calmed him slightly. Feeling better, he went to remove the hat, but it had one final warning.

"Never, ever open the vault," it whispered.

He started to put the hat back on, but McGonagall was rapidly approaching, worry etched upon her previously stern face. At her obvious concern, he got himself under control. He may be a Slytherin, but the staff was still going to give him a fair shake.

Besides, the hat must be hidden somewhere around Hogwarts during the year. He'll just find it again, and get the answers he couldn't today.

Looking around, he noticed that the Great Hall was still mostly silent, fear and uneasiness equally distributed among the faces of his schoolmates. Apparently, sorting freakouts weren't all that common.

It began slowly, but as he walked toward the Slytherin table, head down, he heard a solitary pair of hands clapping for him. Raising his gaze, he was humbled by the sight of a nervous looking Tracey standing and clapping for him. He sent her a wide smile, pouring all the gratitude he could into it. About half of the table followed Tracey's example, and Harry was pleased to note that fear isn't nearly as prevalent here as in the other houses. He saw curiosity and wonder upon the faces of the younger students, with guarded, indecipherable expressions upon the older ones. Draco, unsurprisingly, didn't exactly seem thrilled with the hat's choice of house for Harry, if his scowl was any indication.

Before sitting next to Tracey, he took a final glance toward the Gryffindor table, where two of his friends from the train were sent, as were his parents upon their arrival.

Gryffindor. Of all the tables, Gryffindor clearly radiated the most resentment and malice from its students, with perhaps half of its students scowling at him. Hermione and Neville both looked concerned at the amount of pestilence some of their housemates were displaying.

Now seated, Harry began to shake the hands of those willing to do so, which included Millicent Bulstrode, and a tall, thin boy that shook

his hand without comment, oddly enough. He couldn't help but feel a perverse pleasure at Draco's continued fuming.

"I'm so glad someone I know is with me," Tracy confided to him in whisper form. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a first-year girl staring at Tracey with unbridled dislike.

"Hey, mudblood!" the blond, pug-faced girl yelled. "Find another table, no mudbloods allowed!"

The newly sorted first-year Slytherins broke into hearty guffaws at girl's comments. Tracey withstood the barb stoically, her mouth thinned to a line. Glancing down, he saw her hand around a fork, gripping it so tight her fingers were chalk-white.

"GRYFFINDOR!"

At the hat's latest declaration, a tall, red-haired boy walked over to the corresponding table. Before sitting, he threw a look of deep loathing at Harry. Indeed, it seemed Gryffindor could be a problem, and Harry hoped that the impression he left upon Hermione and Neville was great enough to overcome the bias of their house.

The Sorting ended with "Zabini, Blaise" being sorted into Slytherin, where he sat with Malfoy and his cohorts. Harry heard random grumblings around the hall about Slytherin getting more students than anyone, which seemed absurd. Should they go against the hat's decision in the name of meaningless equality?

With the conclusion of the Sorting, Dumbledore rose to his feet, arms spread wide, beaming. While the Headmaster was clearly smiling, Harry couldn't help but notice the dark circles around the Dumbledore's eyes, and the aura of exhaustion surrounding him.

"Welcome to Hogwarts!" Dumbledore greeted. "There will be a time for words, but that time is not at hand!"

To loud applause and cheers, the tables in front of them filled with almost literal mountains of food, more than Harry had ever seen in his life. Suddenly aware of his growling stomach, he began to dig in, with great delight. Turning to the side, he couldn't help but notice Tracey was less than enthused with the thought of eating.

"Tracey, don't let those jerks keep you from eating. Do you really want to go sleep hungry tonight?"

Tracey nodded humorlessly at his comment.

"I guess it'd be better to just be pissed off, instead of pissed off and hungry."

"Exactly."

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Throughout the feast, Harry and Tracey were mostly left alone, aside from the occasionally verbal jab, which they ignored. Becoming bored, Harry began to scan the staff table.

Hagrid was drinking deeply from his goblet, while Professor McGonagall and Headmaster Dumbledore were deep in conversation. At the far right was a man with short-cropped brown hair, in midnight blue robes. He nodded to Harry slightly, taking him by surprise.

Had this man been watching him the entire time?

Harry supposed the idea wasn't completely insane, considering how notorious a figure the Prophet had made him. As Harry locked eyes with the professor, a huge pain lanced through his scar. He gasped at the sudden torment, but as quickly it had come, the agony departed.

"Are you okay?" Tracey asked at his odd outburst.

"I'm fine," Harry replied, "just a sudden pain in my head. It's gone now."

The professor had stopped looking at him, but another staff member had picked up the slack. He had sallow skin, a hooked nose and long black hair that didn't look particularly well-washed. The stare he leveled at Harry was one of deep loathing. Sadly, it seemed that at least one of the staff members believed the Ministry's swill.

Before them, the desserts they had been relishing disappeared. Dumbledore rose to his feet, stilling all conversation in the room.

"The time for words has come, now that we are all properly watered and fed."

The Headmaster warned that the Forbidden Forest was off limits, and that Filch, the school caretaker, wished to reiterate that use of magic in the halls between classes was forbidden.

"Quidditch trials will be held in the second week of the term. All students are welcome to try out, and any parties interested in playing for their house team should contact Madam Hooch."

"Also, the third-floor corridor on the right side is under repair, and thus closed. Anyone not wishing to fall hundreds of feet to their death through the broken flooring would be advised to avoid it."

Harry made a mental note to not make a side trip down that corridor.

"As most of you are well aware, Professor Thistlewood will not be rejoining our staff. Our former Muggle Studies instructor, Professor Quirrell, has generously decided to take his place. Please help me to welcome our new Defense Against the Arts instructor."

Polite applause rippled through the crowd as the man at the far right of the staff table stood up, and gave a single wave, a slight smile upon his face. There didn't seem to be anything outwardly suspicious about the normal-looking professor, but why had his scar hurt when locking eyes with the new Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor? Quirrell certainly looked the part of a professional, with his neatly trimmed hair, and crisp, spotless robes.

Dumbledore smiled wide at the assembled students.

"Thank you all for the generous welcome for our new instructor. First years, please follow your house prefects to your respective dormitories. And now, bedtime. Off you go!"

With a great rustle of clothing, all the students rose, Harry and Tracey included.

"Harry, where are we supposed to go?" Tracey asked, looking around.

Harry hadn't the faintest clue, but noticed that Malfoy and his cronies were suspiciously absent. With barely a thought, he climbed onto the bench, and surveyed the area. After a moment, he noticed Malfoy and his cohorts following a much taller boy, probably showing them to the dormitory.

With a slight scowl, he jumped down and grasped Tracey's hand, pulling her behind him as he deftly wove through the crowd. He reached the Great Hall entrance, just as the other Slytherins passed through it. He caught Malfoy's eye as they reached the threshold. With a wicked grin, the blond boy caught the apparent Prefect's attention, and said something into his ear. Laughing, the male Prefect turned around.

"First years, this way!" he declared, cruel laughter in his voice.

"Can you wait up!" Harry yelled, trying to ignore the snickering students ahead of him.

Without turning around, the prefect sped up.

"Fucking twits!" Tracey snarled under her breath.

Harry completely agreed with her, becoming agitated himself. What the fuck was wrong with this prick? Perhaps the Slytherin stereotype was well-earned. The duo broke into a run, trying to keep up. They shadowed the group, following them down a steep stone staircase, taking the steps two at a time.

Slightly out of breath, they caught up to the main group at the bottom of the stairs.

"How were we supposed to find the Common Room if you left us behind?" Harry asked, incredulous at their treatment.

"That's not my problem," the Prefect replied without turning around, prompting mocking laughter from the rest of the students.

Venturing further into the gloom, they made their way through the labyrinth below the school, ignoring the taunts from the other

Slytherins in Malfoy's posse. He noticed that Millicent and the silent boy seemed to be slightly separate from the group, as they hadn't said much. Judging by the damp quality to the air, and the constant dripping sounds, he assumed they were beneath the lake.

Without warning, the prefect stopped in front a seemingly innocuous section of smooth stone, causing Harry to break from his stride.

Breath burning in his lungs, Harry put his hands on his knees, slowly regaining his wind. After a moment, he looked up and addressed the prefect.

"Thanks for slowing down for us."

Harry received an icy glare from the older student.

"You may be a fucking celebrity outside Hogwarts, Potter, but here, deep beneath the lake, you're just another big-mouthed snot-nosed brat."

Harry laughed derisively at the statement, causing a malicious smile to break out upon prefect's face.

"Soon enough, I'm going to put you in your proper place in Slytherin, Potter. Hereditary."

At the final word, a large section of the wall lifted up, revealing a passage. Without a look backward, the prefect entered. Malfoy sent a victorious smirk in Harry's direction before following the prefect's lead.

"I hate these guys already," Tracey lamented.

"Me too, but at least we're not alone here," Harry replied, following the group through the lowered section of wall.

The Slytherin common room was very long, the walls and ceiling comprised entirely of a dark, rough stone. Suspended from the low ceiling by chains were green lanterns, giving a slightly arboreal look to the room. A roaring fire blazed in a large, elaborate fireplace at the front of the room, around which several older Slytherins sat in high-backed chairs.

Once Harry entered the room, the stone section of wall slid shut. Upon the Common Room being sealed off, the prefect rounded upon the first-year Slytherins, his expression aggravated.

"Listen up, 'cause I'm only going to tell you little shits how it works here in Slytherin once."

Harry, not at all impressed, adopted his most bored expression.

"Everything here is based upon seniority. I, Terrence Higgs, am the Slytherin fifth-year prefect, which gives me power over everyone younger than me. You'll do everything an older student asks you, or they'll be problems."

Harry didn't think this pompous asshole could be any more transparent, exaggerating the importance of his position, and wielding his illusionary power as a weapon. Simply, it was bullying, only on a slightly official level, and there was nothing a bully hated more than being marginalized, made impotent.

Bullies were a plague upon the world, feeding on the weak to justify their own supposed superiority. Anything that could be done to topple him from his little pedestal, Harry had every intention of carrying out.

The prefect glared at Harry specifically, prompting him to stage an exaggerated yawn. Scowling, the prefect resumed his spiel.

"If you're not as empty-headed as you all look, you might stumble into next year, and perhaps earn some respect here. I, Terrence Higgs, am a prefect, putting me one step below a king here. In Slytherin, Professor Snape is our Head of House, and will be your king, and as with all kings, his word is law. Whatever else you were before arriving here, you're now a Slytherin before anything else. Everyone hates us, envies us, so we watch each other's backs outside this room. Only being first years, no one's going to stick their neck out for you, so don't fuck up, or at least not in front of any of the professors. Follow these simple rules, gain Slytherin some prestige, and you might be fine."

Higgs paused long enough to send Harry another glare. Apparently, he hadn't yet figured out Harry wasn't intimidated by him, nor was he

smart enough to realize that Harry just wished to undermine his authority at every opportunity.

"Violate them, and you'll find out just how harshly we deal with problems."

His speech done, he carelessly pointed out the boys and girls dormitories, each on opposite sides of the room, with the first years being placed at the rear of the room. Abruptly, he left them behind and went to sit with his classmates near the fire.

"What a great ambassador to new Hogwarts students," Harry remarked dryly.

"That's not even the worst part," Tracy added. "Imagine how bad the other ones were if Terrence was made prefect."

Harry laughed slightly at her point.

"That's going to keep me up tonight, so thanks for the chilling thought."

"You're welcome," Tracey remarked. "I'm going to try to go to sleep. See you tomorrow?"

"Yeah, see you tomorrow," Harry replied, giving her a single wave. Their goodnights exchanged, Harry began walking toward the rear of the room, where the male first-year dormitories were located. There was a small archway, with a green number "one" etched into the top of it. Beyond was a stone hallway, which opened up at the end into a large circular room. Six four-poster beds, adorned with bright green hangings, were equally spaced around the room's circumference. He moved toward the bed with his trunk in front of it, and sat upon it, marveling at its comfort.

"A lot nicer than the box you slept in at the orphanage, eh Potter?" Zabini mocked from his bed across the room, eliciting laughter from all of his other housemates, save one. The boy who had shaken his hand wordlessly after his sorting, Theodore Nott, was engrossed in a book, not paying any attention to the proceedings.

Harry ignored the bait, opting to stay silent. Even if the company sucked, at least the beds were nice. Not quite as good as the one at

the Flamels, but indeed far better than the one at the orphanage. Not nearly as cramped there, either.

"What the hell are you doing?" screamed a female voice, that sounded like an angry version of Tracey. Harry jumped up, and ran out into the common room.

Directly between the two first-year dormitories were two girls, face-to-face. Tracey appeared to be arguing with the unpleasant pug-faced girl from the feast, Pansy. Tracey's trunk was between the two of them, with scuff marks on the floor leading to its current position. Harry couldn't be sure, but it appeared that Pansy had dragged the trunk out of the dormitory.

"There is no way I'm sharing a room with a filthy mudblood," Pansy claimed, staring down at Tracey, who was almost a full head shorter. From behind Harry, he heard the rest of his roommates file out to catch the spectacle.

"Sharing the same air with you makes me sick too, but the Sorting Hat didn't really give me much of a choice," Tracey replied icily.

A growing, albeit silent crowd began to gather around the two girls. Their eyes were calculating, watchful, like an inquisition. Harry didn't know if either of the girls realized it, but the groundwork for their entire respective futures in Slytherin was being laid, before a jury of their peers.

Pansy laughed derisively.

"The stupid hat made a mistake, since there's no way a no-talent mudblood could have ever made it into the most noble of Hogwarts' houses."

Tracey's face tightened at the statement, slowly turning red. Harry noticed her hands were balled into fists, clenched so tightly they were white. It looked as if Tracey was trying to keep her temper, but Harry didn't know how much longer it was going to hold if Pansy continued to taunt her.

"You know, I'm not exactly wowed by your talent. I mean, you did drag my trunk out here instead of levitating it out."

Pansy sneered at Tracey's words.

"Yeah, like you know any magic. You don't even belong in this world!"

Completely oblivious to the growing coldness in Tracey's eyes, Pansy reached into her robes and pulled out a gold locket.

"This locket has been in my family for hundreds of years. It's a symbol of our family's place in this world. You, you're an imposter, a thief, in a world you have no place in."

Pansy opened her mouth to continue, but Tracey darted forward, and grabbed the locket with her left hand, pulling it toward her. Before shock could even register on Pansy's face, Tracey's right fist smashed into it, dropping her like a stone.

As Pansy lay on the ground whimpering and snuffling through her freely bleeding nose, As Tracey leaned down, the fallen girl's eyes grew wide with fear.

"Why didn't you use your wonderful magic to save yourself?" Tracey asked calmly, as if discussing the week's lunch schedule.

Pansy stared up at her with red-rimmed, tear-filled eyes, but said nothing as rivulets of blood dripped from her chin. Spurned by the lack of answer, Tracy dove on top of her, and began to violently shake Pansy by her robes.

"I asked you a fucking question!" Tracey snarled as Pansy's head snapped back and forth.

Harry, noticing an approaching upper-classman, intervened, pulling Tracey off the openly wailing Pansy. While Harry thought that Pansy certainly pushed Tracey to the ledge, she didn't deserve to be beaten within an inch of her life.

She struggled against Harry for a second, before giving up, conceding defeat. From the corner of his eye, he saw Draco step from the crowd.

"Who do you think you are?" Draco asked. "My father will have you expelled!"

Tracey started to move toward the blonde boy, but Harry tightened his grip on her. She gave up immediately, seemingly spent. Harry assumed that she had released all the venom within that had been building up since the Sorting, and now wanted nothing more than sleep.

"This is between the girls," Harry stated. "Let them handle it."

Draco sneered.

"If you like your mudblood so much, you should get her on a leash, before she hurts someone else."

"Draco, why don't you-"

Harry was cut off by Tracey.

"By someone else, you mean you, right? You pathetic sissy, Pansy probably would have put up more of a fight than you, since mummy won't be around to save you."

"I told you, don't talk about my mother!"

Tracey laughed mockingly at Draco's order.

"Did mummy really fight all your battles before she hired Crabbe and Goyle to protect you?"

"I warned you!" Draco spat, withdrawing his wand. Harry darted forward and clamped his hands down on Draco's arm.

"Once again, it's between them, let them handle this."

"Go fuck yourself, Potter!" Draco snarled, tearing his arm away.

Suddenly, Harry felt a large hand tighten upon his shoulder. Moving quickly, he squirmed out of the grasp, clasped the offending wrist and spun around. His movement placed himself behind Higgs, the prefect who tried grab him. Harry twisted the wrist harshly, sending the prefect to his knees with a hiss of pain. The older boy struggled for a few moments, but was unable to extract himself, giving as

Harry began to exert more pressure. Angry, but unsure of how to escape, Higgs resorted to threats.

"I'm going to have Flint kill you, you little fucking shit!"

"What's a matter, an icky first year too much for you to handle?" Harry asked mockingly, before his mind caught up to his actions. What the fuck had he just done? Was he insane, attacking a prefect? Also, how the fuck had he so easily incapacitated the older, bigger student? He certainly never remembered taking self-defense lessons.

As if it were on fire, Harry let go of Higgs's wrist, pushing it away from him. The movement sent the prefect to the ground, face-first. As Higgs jumped up in a whirlwind of robes, the onlookers began to openly laugh and point at him.

The humiliated, beet-red prefect started to say something to Harry, but instead chose to storm off towards his dormitory. The crowd quickly dispersed after Higgs left, chuckling as they walked away. Draco sent a final scathing look before retreating.

What had he done? How the hell was he going to make it in Slytherin by kicking around the older students? Regardless of whether they deserved it or not. Momentary shaking the thoughts from his head, he turned his attention to Tracey.

Harry pulled out his wand, and cast a featherweight charm upon Tracey's trunk. She grabbed one of the handles, and looked up at him. Her eyes were tired, all the rage gone from here.

"Thank you, Harry," Tracy remarked in a soft voice, "it's nice to have a friend here."

"It wasn't a problem, Tracey," he replied. She smiled at him a single time, before pulling her trunk back to her dorm. Harry, following suit, did the same. He changed into his pajamas and brushed his teeth quickly, before collapsing into bed, drifting quickly into sleep.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Where was he?

Harry knew only that he was seated. A thick, sturdy looking black door was in front of him. He tried to get up, but found himself unable to, apparently tied down. Looking down, however he saw that nothing bound him to the wooden chair.

"No Harry, it's all your fault. You tied yourself to the chair, so that you wouldn't have to see," a voice unseen mocked.

"Who are you?" Harry yelled, his voice echoing throughout the room.

"Me? I'm not important. What's important is that once again, like a child hiding under his bed, you run from the answers that could set you free."

With a grunt, Harry fought against the invisible bonds, snapping them. Free, he jumped up and spun around, to confront his captor – only to be greeted by a blank white wall.

He turned his body in a full revolution, searching for any signs of life, but it really did seem like he was the only one in the room. If that was the case, who had been talking?

"Who indeed?" the voice asked, coming from directly behind him.

Harry spun around, to discover that the voice was coming from the other side of the door.

"You're half correct, Harry. While I am physically a part of you, in a very real sense, I am behind this door. Oh, the things I could show you if given the opportunity. Would you like to see, Harry?"

The voice began to change towards the end, becoming less human, decipherable. Harry slowly began to back away from the door, until his back collided with the opposite wall.

"Come now, Harry," the inhuman voice implored, "don't you want to see?"

"N-no."

The voice laughed at this stutter.

"Oh, how the mighty have fallen. Once, the secrets of the universe were exposed to you, but now you shrink away from them. Such a tragedy, Harry."

Harry searched the room frantically, but there was no other means of escape, and he certainly wasn't considering the door with the inhuman voice behind it. Why wouldn't the voice leave him alone?

"We were ancient long before the universe began its expansion from an immeasurably small pocket of plasma, Harry. Why would we listen to the pleadings of a scared little boy? There's only one way out of here, Harry, and it's through us."

Harry moaned slightly, knowing the voice was right. However, whatever this thing was, it had been driven insane by whatever lay on the other side of the door. Harry was suddenly very sure that, should he pass through it, he would be lost as well.

"Yet sometimes, choice is nothing but an illusion. Open the door, Harry, and set yourself free."

To his horror, his feet began to move, bringing him to the door. As his arm began to rise, Harry started to fight back. He grabbed his arm with his other hand, forcing it down. While it felt like holding back an avalanche, little by little, sweat pouring down his face, he triumphed. Letting out a shaky breath, he once again stepped backwards.

"We will not be ignored, Harry. If you won't free us, we'll free ourselves."

Heat began to assail Harry's senses as flames began to lick from under the door. However, the fire was pure ebony, the complete absence of light. The smoke given off by the black flames was even more discerning. Horrible phantom shapes danced in the smoke, shapes so unnatural Harry's mind couldn't interpret them.

The fire spread along the walls quickly, consuming all in its path, yet he refused to go to the door. Geysers of fire surrounding him, he began to cough violently, his vision growing dim. As he sank to the floor, the door opened on its own accord, revealing...

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry had no recollection of his dreams the next morning but figured it hadn't been pleasant, if the tear tracks on his pillow were any indication. Oh well, he didn't remember any of it, so it couldn't have been anything that bad.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Author Notes:

Again, posting ahead of schedule. I was surprised by how quickly this chapter formed. Next one might be a while though, probably mid-December. As always, though, I'm susceptible to the vagaries of real life.

First chapter in the third arc, Harry's first year at Hogwarts. I've got a solid plan for the year, so hopefully the chapters will flow well. What did you think of Harry being sorted into Slytherin? My vision of both Quirrell and Tracey was inspired by BigDonaDiet, so he gets thanks here.

Any comments, suggestions, or criticisms would be deeply appreciated, and inspire me to write as opposed to playing video games. I'll make an effort to answer every review I get.

Thanks to my co-conspirators, darklordmike and Mira Mirth, for their valuable assistance with plotting, characterization, continuity and grammar. Their combined efforts probably save me at least a week of editing every chapter, and are deeply appreciated.

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Ninth Movement: Deconsecrate

September 2, 1991

It appeared Hogwarts was not going to be different from the Flamel residence with regards to his sleeping habits. After noting the moistened state of his pillow, Harry glanced at his watch, to see the hour-hand resting slightly ahead of three.

Three o'clock and he couldn't have been less tired. Once again, only four of sleep. Fantastic.

Familiar with his early-hour struggles, Harry kicked off his covers and got out of bed, grabbing the Charms book he had strategically left upon his trunk. Long ago he had given up laying in bed, as it never brought him any closer to re-entering sleep. He considered changing out of his pajamas, but let it be.

Much to his surprise, upon entering the Common Room, Harry saw that he was not its only occupant. Perched upon one of the couches, right next to the still-roaring fire, was Tracey. Her petite form was clad in light purple pajamas, her blond hair tied up in an unruly bun. She appeared to be starting deep into the crackling flames.

"I guess I'm not the only one having trouble sleeping," Harry remarked, being able to approach without alerting her.

Tracey jumped slightly at his words, spinning her head around. Harry immediately noticed how tired she looked, and how unguarded her face seemed in comparison to their first encounter on the Hogwarts Express.

"Did Pansy kick you out of the room?" Harry asked, assuming her bed compared favorably to the couch in terms of comfort.

"Pansy will probably be too scared to even look at me for the next week," Tracey replied with a small smile.

"I'm not exactly surprised, you really popped her hard."

Tracey's smile immediately vanished, replaced by abashment.

"I...uh...kinda have a problem with controlling my temper," she eloquently admitted.

"You did the right thing," Harry asserted. She looked very surprised by his approval of her actions.

"Slytherin doesn't seem to like muggleborns too much, so a show of power was probably the only way to earn respect here. By not taking any of Pansy's shit, I think you kinda proved yourself."

"I know all of that," Tracey said in reply, "I'm just surprised that you agree."

The two children were silent for a moment, staring into the fire. Harry was beginning to see that perhaps the Sorting Hat's decision wasn't as stupid as he originally thought, and maybe he did belong here.

"Why are you out here?" Harry asked suddenly.

Tracey frowned at his question.

"You are one nosy bugger."

"I'll leave you alone if you want," Harry replied, shrugging.

Tracey shook her head.

"It's not really a big deal, I just didn't feel comfortable being around the other girls. I thought maybe I'd do better in the Common Room."

Based upon her earlier misgivings about the magical community, Harry wasn't surprised. Tracey seemed like the sort of person who would never allow herself to be burned more than once. The first time was always enough.

"Who did you meet before Hogwarts that made you scared of this world?" Harry asked, voicing his suspicion.

Tracey looked surprised, before smiling ruefully.

"I guess my anti-pureblood rants gave it away, eh?"

Harry nodded.

"When I came home from Diagon Alley, I had a new wand and a book of spells. I knew my Hogwarts letter said not to use magic at home, but the idea of doing magic was so neat I couldn't resist, so I tried a tickling charm from my new spell book. It worked on my second try. It...it felt so great to do something like that on my own."

She closed her eyes, clearly relishing the memory. It had most likely been her last completely untainted one of the wizarding world.

"Let me guess, you got a visit from a friendly Ministry employee?"

Tracey, broken from her reverie, sighed.

"Yeah, some Ministry twit practically broke down the door. He started yelling at me, called me an 'idiotic mudblood', said he'd come back and snap my wand if I crossed the line again. Worst of all, he had his wand pointed at me."

Harry found himself getting angry. A girl wants to do a simple charm that wouldn't hurt anyone, and she brings this down upon herself? It just wasn't right.

"What an asshole," Harry remarked forcefully.

Tracey smiled slightly at his vehemence.

"Not just any asshole, but a cowardly one. Thinking back, I am kinda glad that he pointed his wand at me, though."

"Why's that?" Harry asked, slightly confused.

"My dad, a policeman just getting off his shift, walked in on his daughter being threatened by a red-faced stranger."

Harry smiled, liking where this was going.

"Daddy came up from behind the wizard," Tracey continued, "and slammed him against the wall. The wizard started yelling at daddy, saying he was part of the Muggle Relations department, and should be let go immediately. Daddy then slammed him against the wall again, and took his wand away, telling him he'd snap it if the wizard didn't shut the fuck up."

Harry chuckled, causing Tracey's smile to widen.

"The wizard still didn't listen, so daddy lost patience, and slapped a pair of handcuffs on him, and bounced him off the wall again. The Muggle Relations wizard didn't say much after that, as daddy dragged him to the doorway, and told him if he ever threatened his daughter again, he'd deal with him personally."

Harry began to laugh harder. If there was a better way to deal with out-of-line Ministry employees, he hadn't found it.

"Oh, it gets better. Daddy undid the handcuffs, and threw him off our stoop. He then gave me the wizard's wand, and told me to give it my best. I took the wand and threw it as hard as I could, where it landed in the busy road in front of our house."

"That's great!" Harry exclaimed, still laughing. Tracey's face grew soft as his statement.

"I couldn't ask for a better father," Tracey said softly. "I just wish the Ministry hadn't been so cruel. After that, I didn't even want to come to Hogwarts. It was daddy that made me go."

"Really?" Harry remarked, surprised.

"Yeah," Tracey confirmed. "He said that I had been given a special gift, and that it would be a waste to not at least see what the wizarding world was like. He said to give it a semester, and that if it hadn't gotten better, I could come back fully to our world."

"What do you think so far?" Harry asked.

Tracey let out a humorless laugh.

"Well, being in Slytherin isn't helping, but I like a few of the people I met here. I guess we'll see, I don't know if I want to deal with the Ministry," she finished with a sigh.

"Nicolas, my legal guardian, taught me all about the Ministry. He said it was full of friends of friends, political hacks, most of them clueless blood supremacists. It sucks, but you've only seen the worst of wizarding society."

Tracey snorted.

"I hope so, because I can't imagine how a Ministry employee could be any worse."

Harry's mind immediately went to Lucius Malfoy, but he kept that thought to himself.

"There are a lot of fair witches and wizards out there, who don't care about bloodlines. As Nicolas told me before I came here, all bigotry stems from fear. Tracey, they're all afraid that there's a chance you're better than them, and that you'll accomplish more than them."

"Yeah, daddy said the same thing, but it's nice to hear it again," Tracey admitted.

"Besides," Harry continued, "imagine how good it's going to feel when you're more successful than any of those narrow-minded idiots."

Tracey smiled gleefully at his point.

"You know, Harry, I think it'd feel pretty fucking good."

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

"Harry, I don't think we're going to have this down until Christmas," Tracey remarked bitterly as they arrived at breakfast.

Their previous night's first journey to the Slytherin dormitories hadn't done much good for their sense of direction. The labyrinth of passages below Hogwarts had thrown them for a loop today, accounting for many false starts and backtracking.

"Don't worry about it," Harry assured. "Today was the first time going in the opposite direction; we'll probably have it down by the end of the week."

"Really?" Tracey skeptically asked.

"Well, hopefully, anyway."

On that positive note, they dug into the breakfast buffet piled high upon their table. Having such an abundance of time, they were able to eat at a leisurely pace, free from the heckling they expected may accompany future meals with his housemates.

As the meal wound down, Harry leaned back, nibbling upon a scone. Looking up, he watched the ceiling's weather, which has been charmed to look like a bright, sunny day.

Quickly moving footsteps interrupted his inspection of the Great Hall's ceiling. He looked down, to see Professor Snape moving rapidly toward them, black robes billowing. Harry noted that his Head of House looked just as disgusted as he did during the Sorting.

Professor Snape handed Tracey her schedule first. Tracey clearly had no inkling of how to react to the angry professor handing her the schedule, and settled for thanking him quietly, all while looking at her shoes. There was no reaction from Snape, who disregarded Tracey's thanks and handed Harry his own schedule.

"Thank you, sir," Harry stated respectfully. Snape sneered at Harry's thanks, and stalked off, leaving Harry perplexed.

"Aren't we in the one House that's supposed to be accepting of supposed Dark wizards?" Harry asked once Snape was out of earshot.

Tracey shrugged.

"Maybe they're just upset that you're more evil than all of them."

"That must be it," Harry agreed, opening his schedule. Their magical education began with "Magical Ethics", with Ravenclaw. Looking through his schedule, it appeared that the best had been saved for last.

"No Potions until Friday. Is this a good or a bad thing?"

"Well, it probably will leave a sour taste in our mouths to start the weekend," Tracey replied, shrugging.

As they finished up breakfast, Millicent sat down next to Tracey.

"Great work on Pansy last night," the hulking girl congratulated, without any preamble.

"Thanks. I guess you aren't one of Pansy's fans."

Millicent snorted.

"I've never been. When we were little, our parents tried to get us to play together, but it usually ended with Pansy getting too mouthy, and me hitting her, and then Pansy running wailing to daddy."

"And she still hasn't learned to keep her mouth shut?" Harry asked incredulously.

"No, she just chooses to go after the weak," Millicent replied. "Obviously, she kinda underestimated Tracey."

Tracey acknowledged the veiled compliment with a nod of agreement. Harry began to think that maybe his theory was correct, and Tracey had indeed endeared herself to Slytherin by displaying some venom. Also, maybe Millicent was alright after all.

"Hey, we're going to head up to class really early, so we can start to get familiar with the school, and it won't be a big deal if we get lost. Do you want us to wait up for you?" Harry asked.

Millicent shook her head, but seemed pleased by the regard.

"No thanks, it's only Magical Ethics, which I've heard is going to be a joke. I'll see you two up there, though."

They bid Millicent farewell, and made their way out of the Great Hall, weaving between the heavy flow of incoming students. As Harry and Tracey began to ascend the main staircase, they ran into Hermione and Neville, greeting the pair.

The same red-haired Gryffindor that spat a venomous look at Harry during the Sorting gave an encore performance as he walked by.

"What's his story?" Harry asked Hermione, hoping for some insight into the Gryffindor sentiment.

"That's Ron Weasley," Neville answered, "and he doesn't really like Slytherins. Ron claims that you're training to take You-Know-Who's place."

Harry and Tracey both chuckled at the thought. While it was annoying to be generally mistrusted, some things were just too idiotic to get angry at.

"Does everyone in Gryffindor believe that dumb idea?" Harry asked, really hoping that the entire House wasn't that stupid.

Hermione shook her head.

"It's almost instinctual for Gryffindors to not like Slytherins, but all of the older and smarter ones know that the Ministry's claims don't make any sense."

"So, the majority of your House buys into it," Tracey concluded.

Hermione didn't look pleased with the statement, but chose not to pursue it. Harry thanked them for the information, filing it away for later. If the Gryffindor general opinion didn't improve with time, he may eventually have to reason with some of the ringleaders, once he figures out whose opinion carried the most weight.

According to the class schedule, Magical Ethics was held on the second floor, in classroom two-eighteen. The main second floor hallway was shaped like the letter 'U', with the connecting staircase directly in the middle of curve.

"Left or right?" Tracey asked.

Harry shrugged, and started down the right-hand branch. The classrooms were located on the outside edge of the 'U', with the inside edge open to the main entryway. Each classroom had a bronze plate above the doorway containing the room number, but the numbers were increasing, away from room number they wanted.

"I think we should turn around," Tracey stated.

"Why? We've got plenty of time, why not explore Hogwarts a little?" Harry pointed out, turning back to address her while still walking. His case made, he faced forward again, to be greeted by a dead-end.

"Doesn't look like there's a lot to explore here," Tracey remarked, smirking.

Harry grinned sheepishly in response.

"Kinda walked into that, didn't I?"

Tracey nodded in agreement. Harry started to turn, before recalling something Nicolas had said.

"My guardian, Nicolas, said there were a lot of hidden passages around Hogwarts, if one knew where to look. Doesn't this seem like an odd dead-end? Almost every hallway in this school seems to be cluttered with paintings, statues and suits of armor, but almost no blank space."

His case made, Harry began to inspect the blank expanse of grey stone in front of them, running his fingers along it, looking for irregularities.

"This is a waste of time," Tracey whined.

"Maybe," Harry conceded, "but we have plenty of time to waste."

Tracey sighed deeply, and resigned herself to Harry's investigation. She leaned up against the left side of the wall, only to have her elbow sink into the apparently solid stone. Tracey jumped back as if shocked.

"What the hell?" Harry asked, still not completely comprehending what happened.

"That wall's not there!" Tracey claimed, gesturing at a small section of wall.

Harry touched the spot where she pointed to. True to her word, as solid as it looked, the tips of his fingers passed through without any resistance. Gingerly, he explored further, sticking his entire hand in. The hollow wasn't very big, roughly a cubic foot, with a lever of sorts at the back. Throwing caution to the wind, Harry pulled it.

The middle section of the stone wall immediately slid down with a slight grinding noise, revealing a darkened passage beyond.

"Nicolas wasn't kidding," Harry remarked, excited at having uncovered one of Hogwarts' secrets on his first full day. He couldn't help but wonder where it led.

"Harry, you aren't really considering going into the dark, potentially dangerous secret passage, are you?" Tracey asked, eyeing the dark opening distrustfully.

"Well, I'm kinda curious to see where it goes," Harry said, withdrawing his wand, "and the dark I can take care of." After a whispered incantation, he slowly poked his wand into the dark opening, a wide beam of light streaming from the eleven inches of holly.

The interior appeared to be a small stone hallway, perhaps six feet wide. Though slightly dusty, the floor was relatively clear.

"It looks like a lot of people might use this," Harry noted. He stuck his head in the opening, and swung his wand to the left. The illuminated hallway stretched away for twenty feet, before angling out of sight. Harry swung his light source around to the right, revealing two staring figures.

"Boo."

"Fuck!" Harry blurted out as he jumped back, startled.

"What the hell was that?" Tracey asked. Her question was partially answered by hearty cackles coming from inside the opening. Two identical red-haired boys stepped into view, with wide smiles upon their faces.

"Lookit this, George, it appears some ickie first-years found themselves a hidden passage," one of the twins remarked.

"This passage isn't exactly well-hidden," George, the other twin, remarked. "I would be more impressed if they found the hidden entrance to the Prefect's bathroom, Fred."

"Too true, but alas, the little ones, bless their heart, have to start somewhere. It appears the one with the soaked underpants is our resident Dark-Lord-in-training, but who is the young lady under his thrall?"

"Tracey Davis," the girl in question replied, smiling slightly at Harry's plight. "Who are you?"

Fred and George looked towards one another, mock-horror upon their faces.

"Fred, I fear we've been slipping if the first-years aren't being warned about us before the Sorting. We're going to have to step it up a notch."

"Indeed. To answer the young lady's question, we are Fred and George Weasley, the finest pranksters in this fine educational institution."

"What were you doing hiding in the wall?" Harry asked, his shock fading quickly.

"I think an even better question would be what a pair of ickie first-year were doing out at this hour?" Fred countered.

Harry disagreed, but didn't push it. Perhaps, unexpectedly, he had found a starting point to turn the Gryffindor tide in his favor. They obviously thought the rumors of him being the next Dark Lord were rubbish, which was a good start.

"We thought it was never too early to sneak around the school and find new members to join the dark crusade," Harry replied.

The twins snickered at his comment.

"Well, it appears you've a busy time ahead of you. Good luck with that whole world domination thing," Fred remarked, as the twins started to continue down the hidden passage.

"Wait," Harry implored, "does this passage connect to the other side of the second floor?"

"Indeed it does," George answered. "Follow the passage for about eighty feet, and they'll be another lever in a hollow."

Harry thanked them.

"Don't mention it," Fred replied, "just take care to close the passages behind you. The less who know about them, the better."

"Words of wisdom, dear brother," George added. "Now if you don't mind, we've nefarious deeds of our own to undertake."

"Good luck," Tracey added as the twins walked away, each raising a single arm in acknowledgement of her blessing.

"That was...unexpected," Harry remarked once the twins had fallen from sight.

"Yeah it was. You should have seen the look on your face. Did you really piss your pants?"

"Of course not," Harry scoffed, "but my heart did skip a beat. Ready to explore the hidden parts of Hogwarts?"

Tracey didn't look all that enthused with the prospect.

"You know, we still have plenty of time, and could walk back the normal way."

Harry let out a loud mock sigh.

"Seriously, Tracey? The Weasley twins look like they use the passage all the time, so it's not like it's dangerous or anything."

Harry was not going to be deterred on this matter. The very idea that there was a secret world beneath the normal Hogwarts interior excited and invigorated him. It was like being in on some colossal secret.

"Fine, Harry, we'll go into your mysterious dark passage of death," Tracey conceded.

Harry stepped into the passage, and shone his light upon the receptacle on the other side of the wall, which was bereft of

camouflage. Once Tracey had cleared the threshold, he pulled the lever, once again sealing the door.

"See, this isn't that bad, is it?"

"Yeah, it's fantastic Harry, but can we just get out of the dark, dusty passage?"

Harry bowed down.

"Your wish is my command."

Brandishing his wand in front of him like a magical flashlight, they made their way down the hall. There was odd, random writing and crudely drawn pictures on the wall, but it was bereft of the clutter that seemed to line most of the halls of Hogwarts.

"I guess not every Weasley in this school distrusts you," Tracey remarked without preamble.

Harry nodded at her comment.

"Do you remember seeing the twins at the Gryffindor table during the Sorting?"

"Yeah, I think so, they seemed to be the loudest ones at the table, and people really seemed to like them. Do you the twins might be able convince Gryffindor you're not really evil?"

"I don't know," Harry replied. "I just know I can't make it seem like I'm using them. Maybe they'll do it on their own. It's still early in the year, so I've got plenty of time to figure things out."

As Harry's light cut into the gloom, another receptacle came into view. It opened just as the first one had, letting sunlight into the darkness. He poked his head out, to the sight of the correct Magical Ethics classroom before him.

"We definitely took the scenic route, but we made it," Harry remarked to Tracey.

"Yeah, all it cost was pair of ruined underpants," Tracey quickly replied with a slight grin.

"I did not piss myself!" Harry reiterated.

"Well of course you're not going to admit to it."

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

The Wizarding Ethics classroom filled slowly as the morning grew later, with small groups of students trickling in. Though some of the voices faltered upon seeing Harry seated at the classroom's rear, the most prevalent emotion upon the Ravenclaws' faces was curiosity, which Harry took as a promising sign.

Malfoy's brigade was the last to enter the classroom. Pansy's nose appeared to be completely healed, but her mannerisms were still skittish in nature. Tracey picked up on this, and sent Pansy a jovial wave. She flinched in response, before sitting down quickly, her cheeks burning.

"Potter, I thought I told you to get a leash for your pet mudblood," Draco spat.

A few of the Ravenclaws let out gasps at Draco's casual usage of the taboo phrase, and threw scathing looks at the blond boy.

"I guess you still haven't accepted that I don't really care what you say," Harry lightly remarked.

"My father will hear about this, Potter," Draco threatened.

Harry turned to Tracey, ignoring Draco completely.

"Do you think he can fight any of his own fights?"

Tracey shook her head with mock sadness.

"Probably not. Do you think he calls Crabbe or Goyle when a spider crawls too close to him?"

Chuckles broke out around the room at Tracey's comment. Millicent was laughing the hardest, not even attempting to mask her chuckles. This didn't escape Draco's notice, as he sent a glare in Millicent's direction. Not exactly intimidated, she rolled her eyes in response.

Draco opened his mouth to reply, but the classroom door opened again, admitting the professor.

The Magical Ethics professor was a middle-aged woman with a stern expression upon her face, not unlike Professor McGonagall's.

"Good morning, I am Professor Burbage, and will be teaching you about...wizarding ethics."

After naming the class, the professor's face tightened, and her jaw clenched. With wonder, Harry realized that merely mentioning the name of the class deeply bothered her. It appeared Professor Burbage wasn't exactly fond of the course she was teaching.

"The aim of this class," the professor continued, "is to clarify how the Ministry functions, and how it relates to everyday wizarding life."

Harry groaned slightly under his breath, and judging by the chorus of sighs from the rest of the class, wasn't alone in his sentiment. Nicolas had mentioned Ministry meddling in Hogwarts curriculum on occasion, so perhaps this is what he had been talking about. It looked like every week at Hogwarts would start out with a slew of pro-Ministry propaganda. Wonderful.

Ignoring the sounds of displeasure from the class, Professor Burbage pushed onwards.

"Please take out your books, and read the first chapter, 'The Ministry and You'." Her orders given, she sat at her desk and began to write on a scroll of parchment.

With no other alternative, Harry began to read. The first chapter described how hundreds of years ago, there were no unifying bodies in the wizarding world, just warring clans. It said that the establishment of the Ministry was the first, most important step to creating a functioning society.

Harry began to laugh to himself as he read on, and couldn't help but wonder what type of idiot had written this drivel. He expected chapter two would detail how every rainbow in the world originated at the Ministry of Magic, and that the sun shone out of the Minister's ass.

As time stretched on, Harry noticed other students beginning to get bored, and conduct whispered conversations. Oddly enough, Burbage didn't seem at all bothered by this, and just continued writing in her scroll. At the end of period bell, she dismissed them, without giving any homework. This strongly implied that she didn't care about the class at all, but if it left him without homework to do, that was perfectly fine with him.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry's next class, Defense Against the Dark Arts, was located on the first floor. Walking through the corridors, he received his share of intent looks, ranging from fear to interest. Some groups of students even widened their path as Harry passed, hugging the opposite wall.

"Not as impressive as parting a sea, but the extra walking space is still a neat trick," Tracey remarked.

Harry chuckled, appreciating the distraction. He was loathe to admit it, but the constant wary looks were starting to get under his skin. As the Defense classroom came into view, a belligerent group of Gryffindors let out loud hisses as he passed, their faces contorted in dislike.

"Really!" Harry exclaimed. "That's the best you can do?"

"Ignore them, Harry," Tracey ordered, pulling him into the classroom. He went without a struggle.

They took their seat at the front of the classroom, apparently the first members of their House to arrive, and chose a desk near the front. This class had the potential to be really interesting, and Harry wanted a good seat. As the other Slytherins began to enter, he noticed he was not alone in his interest, with each incoming student seating themselves as close to the front as they could.

One minute from the scheduled start of class, a door at the front of the classroom opened, admitting Professor Quirrell. Without a backwards glance to the seated students, he began to write upon the chalkboard.

The main classroom door opened again, admitting a laughing Malfoy, followed by the rest of his entourage. The professor became still

upon hearing the laughter, a piece of chalk still pressed to the board. Malfoy immediately quieted upon realizing that Quirrell was present, and hastily grabbed the nearest seat. As soon as the last of Malfoy's entourage seated themselves, the professor spun around.

"I am Professor Quirrell, and there is a great deal that I wish to teach you all. Therefore, I do not have time to waste waiting upon students to settle themselves," Quirrell stated, his voice cool.

Quirrell bore his gaze down upon Malfoy, who began to fidget under the weight of the cold stare.

"Be punctual, or you will not be a part of this class," Quirrell warned, before pulling the roster from his robes. Malfoy sighed in relief at the distraction, now freed from the professor's cold gaze.

The cool edge immediately dropped from Quirrell's voice as he went through the class roster, which was comprised entirely of Slytherins. Once done, he began to pace back and forth in front of the class, his eyes searching the face of the students.

"Miss Davis, why do we need to learn Defense Against the Dark Arts?" Quirrell asked without any prior warning.

Tracey was clearly surprised by the sudden question, but composed herself quickly.

"Well sir, according to 'The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts', the Hogwarts Founders, afraid that Salazar Slytherin's teachings would corrupt others, formed the class to teach students about the dangers of the Dark Arts."

Quirrell nodded slightly at her explanation, apparently pleased by it.

"I'm glad to see that some of my students are reaching outside the curriculum for knowledge. However, the text you mention was penned by an author with a specific agenda, and thus distorted history to support his arguments. He didn't bother to mention that Rowena Ravenclaw herself was a Dark witch."

"I...I didn't know that, sir," Tracey quietly admitted.

"Not many people do. Books, while unquestionably a valuable resource, are prone to the philosophies and prejudices of their respective authors. Often, to get a clear picture of a particular event, many different viewpoints are required. Regardless, thank you for your contribution, Miss Davis."

"You're welcome, sir."

Quirrell continued his pacing in front of the class, scanning the young faces before him.

"Mister Zabini, why is Rowena Ravenclaw still remembered fondly by history if she was indeed a user of the Dark Arts?"

Blaise didn't look like he had the faintest idea, but took a stab at the answer anyway.

"Is it because Ravenclaw supported the winning side?" Blaise asked, rather than told.

"Was that a question or an answer, Mister Zabini?"

Blaise looked slightly flustered at the professor's point, even though Quirrell had not raised his voice at all.

"It – it was an answer, sir," Blaise decided.

"An excellent guess, Mister Zabini, but only partially correct. Mister Potter, do you have any idea of what might comprise the other half of the answer?"

Harry certainly did, as Nicolas had talked of it during the summer.

"Ravenclaw used the Dark Arts, but was never corrupted by it, sir," Harry answered.

"Very good Mister Potter," praised Quirrell. "That is the essence of what I hope to impart upon you all. I am here only to teach, not to further someone else's agenda. Therefore, I have no intention of deceiving you all. The Dark Arts are not inherently evil."

With one phrase, Quirrell gained the admiration of the entire Slytherin class. Harry was well aware that a good portion of the

children within the classroom had come from Dark families, and probably faced their fair share of prejudice for their heritage. With a small look around, he saw that the class was enraptured.

"Ravenclaw is still remembered fondly because she used the Dark Arts, not the other way around. The Dark Arts, if used with balanced judgment, still allow the user to live a virtuous life. No, the Dark Arts are feared because of the weak-willed souls that would allow themselves to be completely consumed by the Dark."

Quirrell's voice dropped an octave. The students, Harry included, leaned closer.

"There is no better defense against the Dark Arts than hard work and determination. Those that strive to improve themselves, to hone their skills, will never be corrupted. Corruption comes easy to the lazy, who aren't willing to work to increase their power, and seek shortcuts, no matter what sacrifice is required. My ultimate goal is to give each and every one of you the tools necessary to make corruption by the Dark Arts an impossibility."

Dead silence greeted the end of Professor Quirrell's speech. However, he seemed pleased by the reaction of the students.

"Copy down these principles," Quirrell ordered, gesturing to the words he had written on the blackboard earlier.

The students rushed to comply. It dawned upon Harry he had never seen a class react to taking notes with such enthusiasm. Every one of his Housemates, he observed, had admiration and respect shining in their eyes.

Quirrell could probably tell them anything, and they'd take it as gospel.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

The week passed by in a blur for Harry. With each successive day, Harry felt more grateful to be part of the wizarding world, and all the wonderful opportunities it presented. Unlike his schooling at the orphanage, he awoke every day with a slight sense of excitement, wondering what sort of knowledge the coming day would bring.

Significantly less fun were the interactions with his fellow students. While Tracey was always by his side, aside from Hermione, Millicent and Neville, there were very few students that would interact with him. Malfoy and his brigade never passed up an opportunity to snipe at Harry with their poorly conceived barbs, while most of the other First-Years were evenly distributed between fear and loathing. Harry didn't exactly crave the approval of the masses, but it was draining to face so much scrutiny on a daily basis.

Despite his enjoyment of most of his other classes, Harry still found himself nervous for his first Potions class. If Professor Snape had been that unpleasant to him while merely handing him a schedule, Harry didn't want to think about how bad a double-period class would be. He couldn't help but recall the look of pure loathing upon Snape's face at the sorting, or the dismissive way he had been treated during the first day of class.

The one positive Harry could attribute to the class was its location within the dungeons. Though it had seemed daunting at first, he had quickly become familiar with the labyrinth of passages that lay beneath Hogwarts. Hoping to not incite the rage of the unpleasant professor, Harry and Tracey arrived early, and took a desk in the middle of the left-hand side of the classroom.

Looking around, Harry couldn't help but compare the Potions classroom to Nicolas' private laboratory. While Nicolas had his fair share of jars and glassware on display, the unpleasant items had been placed in the back storeroom. Glass sections of the ceiling had thrown the room into a bright light, where everything appeared to shine. However, down in the dungeons, large glass jars lined the walls, placed upon heavy shelves. Here, grotesque creatures were on display for all to see, the very antithesis of the warm, welcoming atmosphere Nicolas' laboratory had possessed.

During his inspections of the room, the class began to fill. He exchanged morning pleasantries with Hermione and Neville upon their arrival, prompting a fair share of dark looks from their Gryffindor brethren.

"Traitors!" Ron Weasley forcefully whispered from the right side of the room. Hermione ignored the comment as she took a seat at the front of the class, closely followed by a glum-looking Neville.

"Can't say that I blame them, Weasley," Draco commented. "I mean, if I was put in the house of idiots, I'd be trying to get into Slytherin too."

Ron's ears darkened at Draco's comment.

"No one wants to be in your evil House, Malfoy!"

Draco's malevolent smile grew wider at Ron's declaration.

"I'm not sure about that. It certainly seems like Potter wanted to be here."

"Of course he would, he wants to take You-Know-Who's place!" Ron claimed, a bitter scowl upon his face.

The majority of the Slytherins burst into laughter at the comment.

"What! The Daily Prophet even says it's true!"

"Weasley, you realize that's one of the dumbest things I've ever heard, right?" Harry asked.

"Shut up, Dark wizard!" ordered the sandy-haired Gryffindor seated next to Ron.

"That will be two points from Gryffindor for your baseless claims," spoke a cold voice from the back of the room.

Harry's head swiveled around, as did the rest of the class. The Potions Master swept down the middle aisle, his dark cloak billowing about him.

"That's not fair!" the sandy-haired boy howled.

Snape swept across the floor, to the front of the boy's desk. He placed both his hands upon the desk, and leaned forward, causing the boy to shrink back.

"You are correct, it is unfair to merely deduct two points. Four points from Gryffindor for questioning my judgment. Would you care to try for a detention?"

Apparently the thought of even more time with the Potions Master was unbearable, as the Gryffindor folded immediately.

"No, sir."

Snape nodded sharply, before making his way to the front of the room, and began role call. Harry felt at least somewhat heartened that at least Snape was spreading the malice around. During the call, Snape passed by Harry's name without verbal comment, but his lips did tighten in dislike.

At the conclusion of role, Snape, in a voice barely above a whisper, began to talk passionately of the intricacies of Potions. As much as Harry was inclined to dislike the Potions Master, he definitely knew his stuff. At the conclusion of the speech, he ordered the students to split into pairs to make a boil-cure potion. Harry laughed inwardly at the assignment, wondering if Nicolas had been aware it was the first part of Snape's curriculum.

"What do you think, Harry?" Tracey asked, looking at the instructions written upon the board.

"I think we're going to do just fine," Harry replied with a smile.

With a dexterity forged from his time in Nicolas' laboratory, Harry began to weigh the dried nettles and crush the snake fangs at a pace far quicker than that of his fellow students. Even Snape, who had criticized everyone but Malfoy harshly, had no comments after seeing Harry's preparations.

"I know you said you had some experience with potions, but I didn't think you were this good," Tracey remarked.

"I may have been modest about the level of training I got," Harry replied with a grin.

"May have been?"

Harry chose not to respond, and instead added murlap essence into the potion, to neutralize the burning which accompanied its usage.

"Harry, that's not part of the instructions!" Tracey warned, bracing herself for a volatile reaction. Just as Harry expected, there was none.

"Relax, Tracey, I've done this before, it's just a numbing additive to make it more gentle when used."

Tracey clearly wasn't sold on not following the professor's instructions to the letter, but had no further comment. With the final step completed, Harry looked around the class, and noted that no one else was even close to completion. His eyes caught the cold, black ones of Snape, who had just reamed out two Gryffindor girls, Lavender and Parvati, for their abysmal attempt.

Snape stalked over, without acknowledging either Harry or Tracey, and leaned over to sniff the cauldron. Harry felt pride rising within, as the potion was flawless, and would surely get a good grade.

How incorrect he was.

After a few sniffs, Snape rounded on the duo.

"Perhaps you two would like to take my place as Potions Master? Is that it?" Snape asked dangerously.

"What," Harry began, before Snape cut him off.

"Keep your mouth closed, Potter," the Potions Master ordered sharply. "Since you two have not yet usurped my position, you are still my students, and thus expected to follow my instructions, as opposed to going off on your own little tangents. Who put the murlap essence into the potion?"

"I did, sir," Harry quickly replied, prompting a smirk on Snape's face.

"Just like your father, Potter, the rules don't seem to apply to you, do they?"

At the snide remark, Harry realized that Snape's clear dislike for him had nothing to do with his reputation, only his heritage. Whatever problems Snape had with his father, he was now passing down onto his enemy's son.

Harry, losing even more respect for Snape, just glared back at the professor.

"Impertinent child," Snape muttered. "Since this potion is clearly not what I asked for, it's worthless."

With a wave of his wand, Snape vanished the contents of their cauldron.

"Consider this a warning, Potter, I won't be as lenient should you display such disrespect next time."

No sooner had the words left Snape's mouth, there was an explosion from Hermione and Neville's cauldron. Snape immediately flew to the accident site, where acrid yellow smoke began to pour forth from the cauldron. Before Harry could react properly, the harsh stench of rotten eggs assaulted his nose.

As the horrible smell wafted through the room, students started to get up, with every intention of fleeing. All froze, however, when Snape whirled around, black eyes ablaze with cold fire.

"Sit down," Snape ordered. The student populace complied, looks of intense disgust upon their faces.

"That will be two points from Gryffindor for failure to follow clear instructions," Snape declared, turning his glare solely upon Neville. "Furthermore, Longbottom, now the entire class must endure the stench of your failure. Perhaps next time you'll pay attention to the directions, or at least maybe your classmates can persuade you to do so."

Neville wilted at Snape's cruel treatment, and began to slouch, as if he could disappear into the floor. Even his fellow Gryffindors were staring at Neville with dislike.

"As for you, Granger," Snape added, turning to the girl in question. "Do you think your grade won't be affected by your partner's poor skills?"

Hermione looked furious at Neville's public reaming, and chose not to answer.

"Cat got your tongue, Granger? No matter, that will be another two points from Gryffindor for your insubordination."

Momentarily finished with torturing the two Gryffindor students, Snape addressed the class as a whole, ordering them to clean out their cauldrons and to put a sample of their potion on his desk.

Poor Neville looked close to breaking beneath the heavy stares of the other students, and cleaned up as quickly as he could. Hermione tried talking to him, but he wouldn't meet her eyes, and just continued to clean. She sent a pleading look over to Harry, who nodded in response. It seemed pretty clear that Neville's confidence, not very high under ideal conditions, had just suffered a major blow, and could use some help.

A few minutes later, Snape dismissed them. Neville jumped from his seat and ran for the door as fast as he could, trying to leave everyone behind.

Harry, however, was faster. He caught up to Neville, and slung an arm around his shoulders.

"How about we go out to the grounds? We've been in this dark dungeon for too long, and could use some sun."

Neville tried to put his head down and shrug him off, but Harry merely tightened his grip.

"Neville, I'm not going to let you waste this nice fall day. You can sulk all you want later, but right now we're getting some sun. Fuck Snape, don't let him ruin your day."

"You really suck, Harry," Neville replied, smiling slightly.

"That's the spirit!" Harry exclaimed as he let go of Neville's shoulder. Hermione and Tracey caught up to them, and they all made their way outside for their break before the late-morning class. It was an unseasonably warm day, as if summer had mistakenly left it behind when it departed. The group sought sanctuary beneath an elm tree, and flopped down into the grass.

"What the fuck is Snape's issue?" Tracey asked while pulling single blades of grass from the ground.

Hermione's lip curled slightly at the vulgar language.

"He obviously has a problem with Gryffindors, but really, do you have to use language like that, Tracey?"

"That greasy git apparently also has a problem with Harry," Tracey responded, completely ignoring Hermione's plea for a language barrier. "What was the deal with that?"

Harry shrugged.

"From the first day, Snape seemed to have issues with me. He mentioned something about my dad being disrespectful, so I guess he's just passing down his grudge."

"How can such a horrible man be trusted to teach children?" Hermione asked, shaking her head. "If I were you, Neville, I'd be pretty angry right now."

"There's something about him that absolutely terrifies me. I was afraid to say or do anything," Neville admitted, his eyes downcast.

"Neville, he's just a fucking bully," Tracey admonished. "You can't let him run over you like that."

"What am I supposed to do?" Neville asked helplessly.

"If this happens again, just follow Hermione's example," Harry suggested. "He took away points, but he's probably not going to bother Hermione as much, since bullies thrive on people they can push around easily."

Hermione looked pleased by the compliment, but Neville didn't show any signs of cheering up.

"Besides, I did mess up the potion. How is this all so easy for you guys?"

Harry felt bad about it, but there did seem to be a large talent gap between Neville and the rest of their group. It was only the first week, but Harry, Hermione and Tracey all seemed to be picking up their magical education seamlessly. Neville, however, seemed to have

problems in everything aside from Herbology. Harry thought it might be Neville's lack of confidence that was holding him back, but Harry wasn't exactly sure how to help him with that issue.

"Don't worry about the potion," Harry urged. "None of us hold it against you." He wasn't exactly sure about Tracey, but didn't think it would be diplomatic to state it. Tracey didn't seem to possess a very sympathetic nature.

"But how did you mess it up?" Tracey wondered. "The instructions were right there on the board."

Neville sighed unhappily.

"I don't know, I just felt nervous being under Snape's stare the entire class. It was like trying to do work while being tried by the Wizengamot."

The other three chuckled at Neville's analysis.

"Just keep trying, it will get better with time," Hermione assured him.

"Besides," Tracey added, "you do still kick arse in Herbology. Don't forget that."

"And we have flying lessons next week, where you're sure to do fine," Harry said, piling on, attempting to boost Neville's low confidence. Apparently it wasn't the right thing to say, as Neville looked disheartened by the thought.

"I can't really fly," Neville mumbled, staring at the ground.

"Why not?" Harry asked, as he thought all purebloods learned to fly at an early age.

"Well..." Neville started, clearly stalling.

"We're not going to make fun of you," Hermione coaxed, sending him a smile, to which he relented.

"My Great Uncle Algie, a Quidditch fanatic, tried to teach me when I was little, but every time he tried it usually ended badly. After a while,

he just stopped trying. First I made an arse out of myself in Potions, and next week I get to do it in front of everyone."

Harry shook his head in denial, but was inwardly pleased. The keys to helping Neville's confidence had just fallen into his lap.

"Neville, this is easy to fix! I learned how to fly over the summer, and I know I can definitely teach you how. How about it?"

Neville brightened, clearly excited by the prospect.

"That'd be great! You'd really do that?"

Harry laughed in response.

"Of course I would. Are any of you girls interested?" Harry asked, turning to the females in question.

"Yes!" Hermione answered as soon as the words left his mouth. Harry had an inkling Neville wasn't the only one apprehensive about the upcoming lesson.

"Sure, why not," Tracey decided after a moment. "It can't hurt to know how to fly."

"Good. Does Saturday afternoon work for you guys?" Harry asked, to which he received unanimous agreement. The time set, he leaned back into the cool grass, glad that he could help Neville in at least one area.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

"Thanks again for teaching us me to fly," Tracey remarked as they sat down for breakfast Sunday morning.

"Don't worry about it," remarked Harry with a casual wave of his arm. "It was a nice excuse to fly around and not do any schoolwork."

Tracey snorted in response.

"Yeah, like being buried by schoolwork is a problem for you."

Harry shrugged, possessing no defense against her claim. Unable to get more than four hours of sleep a night, he had filled the early hours of the morning by completing assignments. By that token, he was always far ahead of the curve with having his work completed. Tracey, apparently accustomed to being the smartest student in her muggle classes, was having difficulty adjusting to playing catch-up to Harry.

"Don't you ever get tired?" Tracey whined.

Harry shook his head in response to the common question.

"No, never. Once four hours pass, it's like a switch turns on inside me."

"I'd be just as far as you if I could do that," Tracey grumbled.

Harry smiled, taking her gripe in stride. He couldn't explain his unique ability, but enjoyed it immensely, and wouldn't give it up for anything.

"Eh, probably further," Harry remarked.

"Has it always been like this for you?" Tracey asked after a brief hesitation, as if she knew she might be prodding into private territory.

It was a question Harry had long pondered. While at first he thought it had been insomnia, he had quickly abandoned the notion. According to what he had read, insomniacs never felt satisfied with the amount of sleep they received, constantly feeling tired and sluggish. These symptoms were nothing like what Harry had.

Most likely, it had been something he had developed, in his past. It was really the only thing that made sense to him, which just made it more frustrating that he couldn't figure it out. As good a friend as Tracey had been throughout the first week of class, he had no intention of sharing his secret with her. Everything regarding his past had to stay secret until he figured out just what it all meant.

"I guess I was just born with it," Harry lied. He hated doing so, but really didn't have any better sounding options.

Luckily, before he could dwell on the deception of his closest friend at school, owls began to swoop down, a good portion dropping off letters addressed to him.

On his second day of classes, the Prophet had reported of his attendance at Hogwarts. From that day on, he had been receiving his share of hate-mail. Harry had alerted Dumbledore of this situation, and the Headmaster had generously offered to inspect his mail, to determine if there any of the letters had curses, jinxes or harmful potions included as a bonus.

However, one of his letters today had been addressed to him by Professor Quirrell.

"Is he looking to start up a fan-club?" Tracey smirked.

Harry laughed in response. Quirrell had seemed to have taken a shine to him, and often used his in-class spellwork as an example to the rest of the class. Right as he went to open it, an owl dropped off a similar looking letter to Tracey.

"I guess he wants to know if you're interested," Harry remarked. He held off opening his letter, and looked around the Slytherin table. Blaise, Daphne and Millicent were also holding similar letters, oddly enough. His curiosity aroused, he opened up the letter.

There was not a great deal of content, just a simple letter requesting their presence in the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom on Wednesday night for a "unique opportunity".

"Could this have been any more vague?" Tracey asked aloud, eyeing the letter distastefully.

Harry was also displeased with the letter. It was so unlike the straight-forward, no-bullshit attitude that Quirrell seemed to embody. What the fuck was a unique opportunity?

Down the table, he saw Millicent rise, and approach them.

"Do you two know what this is about?" the large girl asked them. Harry shook his head, slightly surprised by Millicent. While she clearly had no love for Malfoy and his entourage, she usually hadn't spoken to either of them in view of the other Slytherins.

"Since Malfoy didn't get one, we're thinking maybe Quirrell's trying to get a Harry Potter fan-club going," Tracey explained. "Do you think Blaise or Daphne would be interested?"

Millicent squinted hard, apparently trying to convey fierce concentration.

"Well, Daphne does write a love letter to Harry every night, before tearing it up while crying. Think she'd be interested?"

Tracey and Harry both laughed heartily at Millicent's comment.

"That might be a bit too psychotic for us," Harry declared.

"Yeah, I thought as much," Millicent replied. "Anyway, if you find out anything more, let me know, okay?"

"Sure," Harry agreed. "Catch you around, I guess."

Millicent then took her leave. Harry noticed that the other Slytherins were sending distrustful glances at her as she passed. Upon sitting, both Blaise and Daphne turned their noses up at her.

"She had to know talking to us would hurt her reputation, right?" Tracey asked, picking up on Millicent's dilemma.

"Yeah, I think so. I just don't think Millicent cares what they think."

"It's a little easier to be brave when you tower over almost all of your class," Tracey bitterly remarked. Harry had to stifle a laugh, considering there was probably close to a foot difference in height between Millicent and Tracey.

"Eh, I saw we give her a chance," Harry argued, "at least she's not one of Draco's shadows."

"Yeah, you might be right," Tracey admitted, "she doesn't seem on good terms with them."

Harry thought that it might be nice to have another pair of eyes within Slytherin. He was concerned that if his feud with Malfoy escalated any further, he may have to worry about retaliation while

he slept. He was enjoying his time at Hogwarts, but it certainly would have been a lot better if that spoiled ponce wasn't here.

"Do you think Quirrell would consider feeding Malfoy to a chimera as a unique opportunity?" Harry asked with mock hopefulness.

Tracey snorted.

"We can only hope, Harry."

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Monday continued the tradition of unseasonably warm weather. As the Slytherins and Gryffindors gathered for their first official flying lesson, there was barely a cloud in the sky. Despite all this, Harry was having trouble concentrating on the task at hand.

"Harry, you look somewhat tired," Hermione observed with a small frown.

"I'm fine," Harry remarked calmly, as to not arouse suspicion. He certainly didn't feel tired, but his mind was distracted. He'd woken up with a tear soaked pillow again, and images of a malicious black fire dancing within his mind. More than that he was unable to recall, but there was a sense of familiarity to it, as if it wasn't the first time he had dreamt of it.

Having enough of being distracted by phantom thoughts, Harry bore down mentally, banishing the fragments from his mind. There were far more important matters at hand.

"Stick out your right hand over the broom," called Madam Hooch at the front, "and say 'Up!'"

"Up!" everyone shouted.

Harry's leaped immediately into his hand. Turning to his right, he saw that Hermione, Neville and Tracey all had similar success. His impromptu flying lesson with the three of them had been very successful, but Harry didn't know how much of it would stick until the official lesson. Apparently, nothing had been lost.

Looking down the line, it appeared that the only student who really seemed to have trouble was a large, black boy bearing the Gryffindor crest. Hooch went off to correct him, leaving their part of the line unattended.

"I've out-flown helicopters on these things before, Potter," Malfoy bragged.

"Really?" Harry exclaimed with shock, "you mean your mum let her baby boy out of her sights long enough to ride a broom?"

"At least I didn't grow up in a filthy muggle orphanage," Malfoy snapped back, guilelessly.

"You're crossing the line, Malfoy!" Hermione yelled, offended by the callous comment. Malfoy smirked in reply, obviously pleased to get a rise out of Hermione.

Harry, however, had heard much worse, and waved her off.

"Hey, I would rather be raised by dirty muggles than dirty inbreds," Harry countered.

Draco looked flustered for a moment, but opened his mouth to reply. Nott, however, got there first.

"Maybe you should stop embarrassing our House for a few minutes," Nott lightly suggested, his face expressionless. Draco glared at Nott over the suggestion, but Nott met the gaze with complete indifference.

Harry was intrigued by the conflict. Nott didn't seem to socialize with anyone, even though he was a pureblood. Come to think of it, he believed this was the first time he had heard Nott speak outside of being called upon in class.

"Pay attention!" Hooch snapped, interrupting Draco's poor attempt at intimidation. "Now, when I blow my whistle, you kick off the ground, hard. Keep your brooms steady, rise a few feet, and then come back straight down by leaning forward slightly. On my whistle – three – two – one."

At one, Hooch let out an ear-splitting blow on her whistle. Harry, along with most of the students, rose, then descended. Only the Gryffindor boy and Pansy seemed to really be having any trouble. Despite this, Hooch seemed very pleased.

"Fine work children, fine work! I can't remember having a more competent group of first-years. Maybe allowing first-years to have brooms is a good idea after all."

Harry had a pretty good idea she wouldn't have been as pleased without Saturday's private lesson, but was glad it ended up working out.

"Moving on, when I blow my whistle again, kick off the ground like before. Then, lean forward slightly, putting your weight toward the front. This will cause you to fly forward. At a slow – and I mean it, slow – rate, fly to the other side of the pitch."

At her whistle, they moved forward, across the pitch. Almost all of the students arrived on the other side without incident.

Almost.

The Gryffindor boy that was having problems earlier was set on a sloping course, which ended the broom embedding itself in the ground. Pansy accelerated too quickly, and the broom went flying out from under her, spilling her backwards in a tangle of black robes. Hooch did not look surprised by any of this, and immediately went to sort out the aerially-challenged children.

"Well done Neville," Harry congratulated, clapping the grinning boy heartily on the back. Of everyone, Harry thought Neville might have the most trouble with his nerves, but he did just fine.

"Thanks Harry."

"Thanks Harry'," Draco mocked. "You're a disgrace to Slytherin! How did you ever get Sorted here?"

Harry turned his back to Draco, and addressed his friends loudly.

"Malfoy certainly seems to have a one-track mind, doesn't he?"

Hermione and Neville nodded, while Tracey let out an exaggerated sigh.

"Isn't it sad how generations of inbreeding leads to decreased mental capacity?"

"Shut up," Draco snapped, "you're just a stupid mudblood. You don't know what you're talking about."

Tracey laughed derisively.

"I may be a mudblood, but at least my parents didn't drop out of the same vagina."

"I'm not inbred!" Draco screamed.

Draco's loud declaration drew the attention of the entire class. Beneath the shocked stares and the building laughter, Draco snapped. He drew his wand, and thrust it at Tracey.

"Morsus!"

Harry calmly stepped in front of her, and conjured a shield, snapping his wand to the right as he did so. Just as he had intended, the spell deflected off his shield, and sped back at Draco.

Draco only had time to widen his eyes before the spell struck him in the forehead.

"Fuck!" Draco exclaimed, grabbing his face with both hands. "My father's going to hear about this!" Draco threatened, before stomping away.

Madam Hooch, just having arrived after hearing Draco's yelling, scowled at the class.

"What happened here!"

Harry, Tracey and Neville had to struggle to keep their laughter in. Hermione eyed the three of them with death glares, clearly not approving of Harry's actions.

"Draco really needs more practice before he tries to use the stinging hex on people," Nott spoke up unexpectedly, "seeing as he hit himself in the face."

Tracey, unable to hold it in anymore, burst out laughing at Nott's comment. Her condition became contagious, until most of the class was gasping for breath. Hooch seemed slightly aghast at the laughter at Draco's expense.

"None of you move while I check on your classmate. You leave those broom where they are or you'll be out of Hogwarts before you can say 'Quidditch'," Hooch warned, before rushing after Draco.

It didn't take long for the laughter to fade away, but once it did, Hermione rounded on Harry.

"You shouldn't have done that."

"Should I have just let it hit Tracey?" Harry asked.

Hermione bit her lip, unable to articulate a rebuttal.

"Okay, I guess you're right about that, but aren't you at all concerned about Draco's father?"

"You probably should be careful," Neville warned. "Malfoy's father is on the Hogwarts' Board of Governors, and has a lot power."

Harry thought he had a far better idea of anyone else just what Lucius was capable of, but kept it to himself. However, he thought another bit of information was definitely in order.

"Did any of you know it was Mr. Malfoy who had the first-year broom rule pushed through?"

All three of his friends shook their heads.

"It's true. I guess he wanted to get Draco on the House team."

"Wait, how would he be able to compete against the older, more experienced students?" Hermione asked.

"Mr. Malfoy would probably just bribe the team captain," Neville replied. "The Malfoys have tons of gold."

A devious smile found its way onto Harry's face.

"Wouldn't it be terrible if both Malfoys didn't get what they wanted, and some other flyer beat him out for the position?"

"Are you really going to try to steal Draco's spot on the team?" Tracey asked with a laugh.

"Harry," Hermione reasoned, "you should think about this carefully. If you beat Draco out, he's going to want revenge."

Harry shrugged in response.

"I've dealt with far worse than Draco," Harry stated. Hermione didn't look exactly convinced, but Neville and Tracey seemed pleased with the prospect.

"Besides," Harry concluded, "you can't really steal something that never belonged to someone in the first place."

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Author Notes:

Again ahead of schedule. Maybe I am getting faster. Regardless, I'm still going to overestimate the time-frame, and say a mid-December release is likely for the next chapter.

Any comments, suggestions, or criticisms would be deeply appreciated, and inspire me to write as opposed to playing video games. I'll make an effort to answer every review I get.

Thanks to my co-conspirators, darklordmike and Mira Mirth, for their valuable assistance with plotting, characterization, continuity and grammar. Their combined efforts probably save me at least a week of editing every chapter, and are deeply appreciated.

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Tenth Movement: Setting the Course

September 10, 1991

A single day ago, it had seemed like a fantastic idea to goad Draco into embarrassing himself in front of the entire class. However, having spent almost the entirety of Monday night awake with his wand clutched tightly to his chest, Harry began to have second thoughts. Not so much about humiliating Draco, the memory of which still brought a smile to his face, but of having to face the consequences. Even if it was only four hours of sleep, there was a world of difference between four and zero.

However, the hammer did not fall Monday night. While Draco might have been an idiot, Harry guessed that he was smart enough to at least take a day to plan out his revenge.

All throughout Tuesday, there was a notable drop in Draco's hostility level. Sure, there was still the occasional angry stare, but Draco kept his mouth shut, which was completely unheard of. At dinner times, he was nowhere to be seen.

Based on those facts, it seemed pretty clear to Harry that Draco would strike Tuesday night. He had no idea what Draco's plan was, but had a good idea of how to counter any nighttime attack.

Harry slipped into bed after his roommates, which was routine. Out of the ordinary, however, was the wand clutched to his chest, and the slow, steady breaths he let out at a constant rate. Sleep threatened to claim him multiple times, but each time he felt himself nod off, he bore down mentally, temporarily banishing the tiredness. After what seemed like an eternity, it was with great relief that he heard stirring from the other beds. Finally, he could end this.

"Aren't Crabbe and Goyle supposed to be awake," whispered a low voice. Harry couldn't be sure, but he thought it was Blaise.

"Morons," a nasally voice murmured to himself, which was almost certainly Draco. "Go lock the door, I'll wake them up."

Harry was pleased with how things were progressing. The locked door would eliminate any unwanted intrusion. Though if his plan back-fired, then the locked door would be a small problem. He heard

the door click as it was locked, and Blaise's light footsteps as he came back to the bedroom.

"You know, it'd be easier to do this without them," Blaise quietly argued. "We could just petrify him."

"No," Draco insisted. "I want to see the look of fear in his eyes as Crabbe and Goyle hold him down, leaving him helpless. I want him to know how big a mistake it was to mess with a Malfoy. Go wake Crabbe, I'll do Goyle."

Harry had to stifle childish giggles at just what Draco was going to do to Goyle. No wonder Draco kept Goyle around at all times. What this the best that they could do? Even if he had been asleep, he was fairly certain the loud "whispers" would have woken him up. Even waking up the twin goons proved to be an ordeal for Blaise and Draco, as they both let out loud, confused grunts upon being woken.

"Shut up, you idiots!" Draco hissed. "You were supposed to stay awake! Get into position!"

Harry heard heavy footsteps as Draco stormed away, followed by a loud bang.

"Fuck!"

"Are you trying to wake him up, Draco?" Blaise drawled.

Harry had to fight the giggles even harder now. Before going to sleep, he had pulled Nott's trunk slightly away from the foot of his bed. Draco apparently missed it the first time, but wasn't as lucky the second.

"Screw off, Blaise. Just cast the damn spell, I'm tired of bumping into stuff."

"Noctu tueri," Blaise uttered. Draco did the same for himself, as well as Crabbe and Goyle, who apparently had not been able to learn the spell in a day's time.

With one phrase, Harry felt assured of his victory. 'Noctu tueri', as he had discovered during his summer reading, was a low-level night

vision spell, amplifying all ambient light. Really, this was going to be too easy.

Upon hearing the multiple sets of footsteps approach his bed, he readied his wand, grasping it tightly. He would need to move quickly, but was still confident it could be done.

"You know what to do," Draco whispered. He got two confused grunts in response.

"How dumb are you two?" Draco moaned. "Go to either side of his bed, slowly pull aside the hangings, and grab his arms."

Heavy footsteps thudded on either side of his bed, and Harry heard the gentle strains of his bed's hangings being pulled aside. Well, now or never.

"Lumos!" Harry shouted, bringing his wand upwards. His eyes closed, still slightly burned from the sudden light. All four of his would-be assailants uttered cries of pain, before falling to the floor with heavy thuds.

His wand still lit, Harry jumped out of bed. He made his way over to Draco, who was lying on his back, hands covering his face. Harry put a foot on Draco's chest, and leaned down into it.

"Do I have your attention, Draco?" Harry remarked lightly.

"You fucking blinded us, Potter!" Draco howled. "You're going to get expelled for this."

"You're not blind, you idiot! If you stopped crying for a moment, you'd have realized that a simple light spell can take out anyone foolish enough to use that low-level night vision spell. If I really wanted to hurt you, I would have used a more powerful light spell, and burned your retinas out."

"You attacked us!" Draco spat.

Harry scoffed loudly in response.

"With a light spell, Draco! Not really something they chuck you in Azkaban for."

Harry pressed down with his heel, eliciting a gasp of pain from Draco.

"Face it, you failed. I could have hurt you all very badly tonight, but I'm going to give you idiots a second chance. I don't care if you play your little name-calling games, but don't ever fuck with me again. This was only a small taste of what I'm capable of. Understand?"

Draco defiantly ignored him, and resumed his struggles. Harry, quickly losing patience, kicked Draco in the ribs with his other foot, prompting a sharper cry of pain.

"What's it gonna be, Draco?" Harry asked menacingly.

"Fine Potter, just get your fucking foot off me!" Draco yelled.

Harry complied, and began to walk away from the scene behind him, stopping only to grab a book from the top of his trunk.

As he walked away from the bedroom, he heard another, as-of-yet unheard voice speak up.

"I'd say the execution of your plan left a lot to be desired, Draco," Nott observed.

With a small chuckle, Harry left the first-year dormitory behind.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

At dinner the next night, Harry felt satisfied by the midnight confrontation. All throughout the day, Draco had left him alone, aside from the half-hearted barbs. The cease-fire might not last past the Slytherin Quidditch tryouts, but he was going to enjoy the reprieve while it lasted.

The tryouts, more than anything, were Harry's main area of concern. He hadn't seen any posters or announcements giving the time and place of the tryout. He had immediately crossed off asking the prefects, fairly certain Higgs would have already turned the other prefects against him. Asking Snape or Malfoy certainly wasn't an option either.

"Wish me luck, I'm off to tempt fate," Harry said to Tracey.

"Good luck," she blessed, all while laughing.

Harry got up from this table, and made his way over to where the sixth-years were sitting. Taking a deep breath, Harry tempted fate.

"Excuse me," Harry said clearly, his voice displaying none of the nerve he felt.

"Fuck off," Marcus Flint replied without turning around. The sixth-year Quidditch captain seemed to be generally feared by the rest of the Slytherin populace, due to his frequent violent, psychotic fugues. From what Harry had heard, the large, trollish Chaser had always possessed a volatile temper, but his father's murder had pushed him over the edge.

His voice caught the attention of several older Slytherins on the opposite side of the table, one of them being Terrence Higgs.

"You better leave," Higgs warned, his eyes angry, "or your payback is going to come sooner than both of us want."

At Higgs' warning, Flint's ears perked up, and the monstrous teen turned around.

"Ye the little brat that proved what a pussy Higgs really is?" Flint asked menacingly, earning snickers from the surrounding Slytherins.

Harry answered in the affirmative.

"Well, what do ye want?" Flint asked, his voice clearly becoming impatient. Fully aware that Flint could crush him like a bug if so inclined, Harry's reply was quick.

"I want to know when the tryouts are."

Flint laughed cruelly.

"Ye trying out for Seeker?"

Harry nodded in response.

"That's good, since Seeker is the only position I'd consider a little pissant like ye for."

"Thanks."

Flint waved him off.

"Ye won't win it, but I don't care if ye try. Show up at the Quidditch pitch Saturday, eight o' clock."

Higgs looked incensed at the development, but wisely chose to keep any commentary to himself, smart enough to not challenge Flint. He settled for glaring at Harry.

All limbs intact, a success unto itself, Harry went back to his seat to tell Tracey the good news.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

After making an early exit from dinner, Harry and Tracey made their way to the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. Free from the normal congestion that plagued the halls of Hogwarts during the day, they set a leisurely pace.

As they turned the last corner, Harry saw a group of students enter the classroom.

"I guess it's not all Slytherins," Tracey commented, "I think one of them was wearing a yellow crest."

Harry nodded in response, as he had seen two yellow crests himself. Curious, he walked through the door, and took inventory. Within the classroom were about ten students, the majority of them Ravenclaws.

All conversation stopped upon his entry, and every face turned toward him. Frustration bloomed within Harry at the reaction of the students. It had been a week-and-a-half at Hogwarts, and he hadn't killed anyone. Harry thought that was a decent indication he wasn't a Dark Lord, but apparently the student populace hadn't caught on. Growing very sick of the stigma attached to his name, he stormed past the other students and sat himself at a desk as far away from them as he could.

Tracey followed him silently and sat next to him. The other student started back up with their prior conversation when the pair sat down. With the noise providing at least a little privacy, Tracey leaned over to him.

Harry sighed deeply.

"This is all starting to get really, really frustrating," he admitted.

"It will blow over, it's still early in the year," Tracey assured.

Harry thanked her right as the door opened again, allowing Millicent in. The large girl looked around for a moment, before joining Harry and Tracey, much to their surprise.

"I guess you two were right about this being a fan club, I don't see any Gryffindors."

Harry smiled slightly, thankful for the distraction. He found it nice that Millicent didn't make a secret of her fraternization with the 'new Dark Lord'. He'd talk to Tracey about it first, but was considering inviting Millicent to their occasional study sessions in the library with Hermione and Neville.

"I guess so," Harry agreed. "Have you heard anything else?"

As Millicent shook her head, the door opened again, admitting Blaise and Daphne. The duo looked surprised to see whom Millicent was sharing company with, but without the rest of Malfoy's entourage around, they took the desk in front of Harry.

"Blaise, what did I say last night?" Harry coldly asked, concerned that the participant in last night's failed attack was sitting so close.

"Relax, Potter. You made your point; I'm just here to see what Quirrell wanted," Blaise haughtily replied.

"Really?" Millicent wondered sarcastically. "'Cause I'm thinking maybe you now know that Draco's side is the losing one, and you're trying to see if Potter's looking for any allies."

Daphne blushed slightly at the comment, but Blaise had no physical reaction, aside from a derisive snort.

"I'm just taking a seat as far away from the Hufflepuffs as possible."

Before Millicent could offer a rebuttal, Quirrell strolled out of his office, clothed in sharp black robes. As seemed to be his habit, it was one minute until the scheduled start of class, seven o' clock. He surveyed the class for a moment, before addressing them.

"Good evening to you all and thank you for coming. I know that there are probably other things you'd rather be doing in your spare time, but I assure you, I plan on making this worth your while."

Quirrell paused for a moment to drink from a glass on his desk, before continuing.

"Through the first week of class, it has become evident that I have some exceptionally talented students in my first-year classes. I'm very impressed by the amount of magical knowledge represented here, as most of you probably already know the entire first year's curriculum. If there's any interest, once a week I will be holding an advanced Defense Against the Dark Art session, to keep your interest level in the material high. Please raise your hands if you're interested."

In the ensuing silence, Harry and Tracey raised immediately raised their hands, slightly ahead of the Ravenclaws. Millicent glanced at the two of them, before shrugging and raising her own hand. Within a few moments, the entire class had followed suit.

"Excellent," Quirrell stated. "I'm glad to have such willing participants, as it leads to a healthier working environment. Well then, let us begin. Would any of you be willing to assist in a demonstration?"

Quirrell had been staring at him while asking for assistance. Taking the hint, Harry raised his hand. Professor Quirrell had always treated him well, so why not help him out?

"Thank you Mister Potter. Please come to the front of the class, and stand across from me," Quirrell instructed, before turning to the class.

"While Defense Against the Dark Arts covers a wide variety of subjects, the first few classes will just include basic spellwork. Mister Smith, what is the incantation for the silencing charm?"

The student in question, a blond Hufflepuff who bore a haughty manner, answered back quickly.

"I believe it's 'Silencio'," Zacharias answered, "but isn't that a fifth-year spell?"

"It may be part of the fifth year curriculum," Quirrell answered coolly, "but that is of little concern to me. However, if you're opposed to doing simple spells, you're more than welcome to leave," he finished, motioning towards the door.

"No sir, I was just curious," Zacharias quickly answered.

Harry chuckled to himself at the Hufflepuff's reaction. Really, who cared what year it was typically taught?

Quirrell nodded once, apparently satisfied, before addressing the class as a whole again.

"The silencing charm has a wide variety of applications, but the most obvious one is limiting your opponent's magical arsenal. If your opponent is unable to cast silently, then you've given yourself the upper hand. As Zacharias previously stated, the incantation is 'silencio'."

Quirrell withdrew his wand, twirled it expertly in the air for a moment, before leveling it at Harry. As he did, Harry felt his scar begin to burn with pain.

"Silencio!"

The professor's red spell jumped from the wand, and collided with Harry's chest. It was entirely painless, but still knocked him back slightly. Just as quickly as the pain in his scar began, it departed.

"Harry, would you please try to speak?"

Harry replied that it probably worked, but no sound came out. He shrugged slightly, shaking his head back and forth.

Looking around, he saw the class smiling slightly at his predicament. Oddly enough, the smiles, for the most part, appeared to lack venom. Perhaps seeing him unable to resist a simple silencing spell made him seem less evil, and more ordinary.

"As you can see, Mister Potter has been rendered completely silent. If this were a duel, he would now have to rely entirely upon silent casting or transfiguration, severely limiting his capacity. Finite Incantatem!"

At the professor's incantation, the charm dissolved.

"To dispel any minor spells, the phrase 'finite incantatem' is used. It won't work on more powerful spells, but it worked well enough for our purposes. How do you feel, Harry?"

"I feel good, sir. Is it my turn now?" Harry asked with a grin, prompting chuckles from the rest of the class.

Quirrell smirked slightly at Harry's question.

"What's the counter to the silencing charm?"

"Finite incantatem, sir," Harry answered confidently.

"Indeed it is, Harry. Enjoy this little treat while you can, there will be precious few opportunities to curse your professors here at Hogwarts, however tempting it may sometimes become."

While the rest of the class laughed, Harry's expression grew serious, concentrating upon the task at hand. Quirrell had trusted him enough to demonstrate the silencing charm, and he didn't want to disappoint the professor. Granted, it didn't hurt that Harry received hours of practice during the summer on this very charm, but Quirrell certainly had no way of knowing that.

"Silencio!" Harry clearly spoke, thrusting his wand at Quirrell. There was another flash of pain as he did so, but his concentration blocked most of the pain out. The spell's aim was true, striking the professor in the chest, but it didn't knock him back at all.

Harry raised his arms in triumph, prompting a laugh from the students. Quirrell looked amused, but began to twirl two fingers on his right hand, indicating for Harry to hurry up. Harry complied, and uttered the counter.

"Very well done, Mister Potter," Quirrell congratulated with his recently-retained voice. "Five points to Slytherin. The rest of the class, pair up, and practice the silencing charm."

Harry, quite pleased by his performance, went back to his desk and partnered up with Tracey. All the rest of the partnerships were within houses as well, except for Millicent, who got stuck with Zacharias. Neither seemed particularly pleased with the arrangement.

For the next hour or so, the class practiced the silencing charm on one another. Tracey initially had difficulty with the spell, but began to grasp it half-way through the class.

"I wish I could do magic over the break," Tracey jealously said, frustrated that it was taking her longer to pick up the charm.

"Well, the French seem to take a different outlook on underage magic. Besides, compared to the rest of the class, you're doing very well."

Tracey wasn't completely mollified, but she did look pleased by the compliment. Aside from a few of the Ravenclaws, and of course himself, she had picked up the charm the fastest.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Quirrell get up from the desk at the front of the room.

"That will be enough for tonight," the professor declared. "We'll meet back here next Wednesday, at the same time. Go straight back to your respective dormitories; I don't want Filch complaining that I'm giving you students free reign of the castle."

With the students smiling at Quirrell's final statement, they began to file out. Harry, Tracey and Millicent exited at the same time, all heading in the same direction.

"How was it working with Zacharias?" Harry asked Millicent, who shrugged in response.

"Not as bad as I thought it'd be. He definitely is a stuck-up cad, with his snide comments, but he didn't take my family's affiliation personally, which is rare for Light families."

Harry nodded in response. He figured there was quite a bit of tension between families of different affiliations, but had never heard of it first-hand.

"What's it like, being in a Dark family?" Tracey asked, clearly curious.

"Why don't you ask our resident Dark Lord?" Millicent smirked in response, motioning to Harry.

"No, he's pure evil," Tracey remarked with a straight face. "I'm curious to know how the slightly evil people live."

Millicent snorted at Tracey's distinction.

"I don't know, to me our lives seem normal. I know my parents aren't above using blood magic, which is frowned upon by Light families, but really, come on, it's just a little blood."

Harry shrugged.

"When I lived with the Flamels, they didn't make me pray to the Light or anything. Besides living in a really big house, it seemed fairly ordinary."

The conversation continued as they walked down the stairs, on their way to the Slytherin dormitories. The more Millicent talked, the more he liked her. Though possessing a rather sarcastic nature, she seemed awfully perceptive about certain subjects, even if her wording was often less than eloquent.

"Hey, what are you three doing out!" a voice called from behind them, interrupting their conversation. Harry turned to see a redhead with a Gryffindor crest and a prefect's badge.

"Going back to our dorms," Millicent quickly answered.

The scowl upon the prefect's face was evident as he closed the distance.

"It's past the first-year curfew, you three are breaking the rules right now."

"First years!" Harry exclaimed with mock indignation, "can't you see that we're fifth years?"

The prefect didn't exactly look amused with Harry's question.

"I know you're a first-year, Potter, and you're not above the rules."

Harry turned to the two girls.

"Uh-oh, this one is sharp, he managed to stay awake during the Sorting."

Both girls began to chuckle, despite their obvious efforts to hold them in. The prefect's ears began to grow red at Harry's comment.

"My name is Percy Weasley, Potter, and I am a prefect. I will not be treated with such disrespect! Professor Snape will hear all about this, I assure you."

Harry gaped at Percy.

"Another Weasley! How many of you are there?"

"None of your business, Potter. Now get moving; go back to your dorms."

"You do realize that's where we were going anyway, right?" Tracey asked.

"Yeah, to think, if you didn't say anything, you could have saved yourself a whole bunch of stress," Harry added in a jovial tone of voice.

"Mark my words, Potter, I'm going to be watching out for you. If you're out past curfew again, I'm going straight to Dumbledore!"

"Well, he sure told us," Harry remarked. "Come on, let's all face our punishment, and go to the place we originally planned to go."

With a chuckle, Harry began to walk away, Tracey and Millicent following closely behind him. He felt the angry gaze of prefect Weasley upon his back, but ignored it. Maybe he had been out of line, but it certainly was fun to mess with the stuffy Gryffindor.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

If Harry had any inkling of the events he had just put in motion, he would have immediately went back to Percy and apologized, but sadly, the hand of fate is often invisible.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

September 14, 1991

The morning of the Quidditch tryout turned out to be the dreariest to date. Steel-grey clouds swirled overhead, sending down a constant drizzle. Harry rather hoped that it wasn't a bad omen of the day to come.

Slightly nervous, he stood slightly apart from the other Slytherin hopefuls. He had shown up twenty minutes early, had been drenched within ten, and now stood shivering. The assembled students were beginning to get restless when the gargantuan form of Flint made his way over. Upon arriving, he did not waste any time.

"Break up into groups, sheep!" Flint ordered. With an index finger that seemed almost as thick as a broomstick, he began to violently gesture. "Beaters! Seekers! Chasers! Keepers!" With every position, he pointed to a different spot on the pitch. Well aware of Flint's volatile temper, the hopefuls rushed to their designated area.

As expected, Malfoy was among the seekers, as was Higgs, the disgruntled prefect, and several other older students.

"You really don't stand a chance, Potter," Higgs mocked. "You should just leave right now; you wouldn't want to embarrass yourself in front of your House."

Harry had many a comeback on the tip of his tongue, but he was among too many hostile faces to respond with his typical cheek.

"Maybe you should worry more about how you're going to win the tryout," Harry replied lightly.

"Like you're going to win," Draco heckled while laughing derisively.

At the comment, the older student turned their attention from Harry to Draco.

"Yeah, like you have such a great chance, Malfoy," an older Slytherin scoffed. Draco let out a small smirk, apparently unfazed by the sarcasm.

"I may have something up my sleeve," Draco admitted, but offered nothing further.

The relaxed comment bothered Harry. Draco was usually boastful and arrogant. Was Draco different in situations where he was sure of the outcome? Did he really have a foolproof plan to assure victory? Looking around, he saw the older Slytherins deep in thought, possibly pursuing the same ideas he had.

From his position, he observed as Flint lined up the prospective beaters, side-by-side. With the prospects lined up, Flint produced a bag of beaters' bats and carelessly tossed the implements in their general vicinity.

"Ye," Flint singled out, pointing to the far left of the line.

"Me?" asked the hopeful, a squat boy who was probably in his third year.

"No, the retarded hippogriff next to ye!" Flint roared. "Ye here to fucking try out, or not!"

Apparently not wanting to enrage the captain further, the Slytherin in question jumped forward, beater bat in hand.

Without any prior warning, Flint produced an un-enchanted bludger from his robes, and banished it at the boy. Completely unprepared, the boy only had time to widen his eyes before the fast-moving object collided with his stomach. The wind was pushed from his lungs in a loud whoosh, and he dropped like a stone.

"Merlin's saggy balls!" Flint roared. "How the bloody fuck are ye going play beater if ye don't move! I've seen fuckin' statues with better reflexes!"

The injured boy, the wind knocked out of him, paid no attention to the irate captain, and continued wheezing upon the ground. This apparently was unsatisfactory to Flint, who walked right up to the boy, and kicked him in the kidneys. Hard.

"Get the fuck off my pitch!" Flint screamed at the boy, oblivious to his whimper of pain. As Flint reared back to deliver another kick, the boy began to scuttle away. Flint deftly bent and picked up motionless bludger, not paying any further attention to the downed boy.

The first hopeful weeded out, Flint turned his attention to the next one. However, the boy spoke up before Flint did.

"You know, I just don't think Quidditch is for me," the boy rationalized, before bolting from the line, back towards Hogwarts.

"Run away, ye fuckin' pussy!" Flint roared after the rapidly retreating form. The captain might not have been pleased, but Harry found it the most intelligent act he'd seen since the start of the tryout.

Flint called the third boy, Bole, by name. With prior warning of what was going to happen, Harry figured Bole would do better. Right before Flint banished the bludger, he saw Bole throw a speculative glance to his right. Harry watched with impending dread as Flint banished the bludger.

Bole reacted quickly, and swung hit beater's bat to the right, directly at another one of the beater prospects. It struck the unsuspecting teenager in the head, knocking him out. Flint, however, didn't seem all that broken up about it.

"Fuckin' fantastic work," Flint encouraged. "We've got ourselves one beater. Which one of ye maggots wants to be the other?"

The beater tryout continued its violent course, with no less than four students hurt by bludgers. Luckily, someone had anticipated the event becoming bloody, and four non-participating Slytherin students sheperded the injured hopefuls to the infirmary. The flow of

injured students was depressingly constant. At long last, Bole and Derrick came out atop the carnage as the new Slytherin beaters.

Harry gulped as Flint turned his attention to the seeker group. He felt slightly better at seeing that the other hopefuls looked just as fearful as he did. Flint apparently picked up on this as he lumbered over.

"I know ye seekers are a bunch of nancy-boys, and I don't want ye all pissin' yer pink panties. All of ye get up in the air, 'bout fifty feet, and spread out.

The seeker hopefuls complied quickly, mounting their brooms and taking to the air. At roughly fifty feet, Harry stopped. He found solace in the fact that Flint probably couldn't hurt him up in the air. Probably.

Without giving the prospects any warning, Flint released a small golden object from his hand. The snitch!

The small, bright object shot straight up. Harry tore off after it in an upward trajectory, clinging tightly to the broom as he accelerated. Droplets of water clung to his cloak as he closed the gap between the snitch. Mere feet from it, he reached out with his right hand, a victorious smile upon his face.

Harry's smile instantly vanished as a bludger grazed off his thumb, tearing out his fingernail. Swearing, he pulled back his hand, just as the snitch rapidly reversed direction. Desperately trying to ignore the throbbing pain from his hand, he leaned back, slowing the broom. Holding on for dear life, he swung his weight wildly to the right. Gravity fought him stubbornly as he reversed direction and pulled against him, but he managed to hold onto the broom by the barest of margins.

Glancing down, he saw that the other members of the Slytherin hopefuls were using some sort of device to launch bludgers at the prone seekers. Harry bitterly realized that it was foolish to assume that one of Flint's tryouts would not include the threat of death. Below him, he saw Higgs advancing on the speeding snitch, having the good fortune to be in the direction the snitch zoomed. Harry sped off, keeping a wary eye out for speeding bludgers.

Descending in altitude, he saw Higgs swerve wildly to the side to avoid another bludger, the effort almost tearing the Slytherin prefect

off his broom. It was difficult to tell over the roar of wind in his ears, but it sounded like the Slytherins on the ground were laughing hysterically.

Wondering if this was all really worth it, Harry streaked toward the retreating snitch. With growing dismay, Harry saw that Draco had a head-start, and was gaining on the golden object. Gritting his teeth, he leaned forward, accelerating as fast as he could. Draco chanced a look backwards, and threw a victorious smirk at Harry.

"You lose, Potter!"

Harry, refusing to yield to Draco, urged his broom forward even faster. He was mere feet away from catching up to Draco, when a familiar whoosh met his ears, prompting Harry to break off his frantic pace. He wanted to win, but didn't want to get killed in the process.

"Draco look out!" Harry warned.

Draco paid him no attention, and began to extend his hand to the snitch. Before his fingers could close around it, a bludger smashed into his foot, breaking it with a wet snap. Draco let out a screech of pain as he swerved wildly off course. Harry immediately accelerated forward, closing his fingers around the snitch. The snitch in hand, he cut downward, narrowly avoiding another bludger. With a glance around, he saw Draco rapidly moving toward the ground, in obvious agony. As much as he didn't like the spoiled ponce, he didn't wish him the agony of a broken foot.

The snitch clutched tightly in Harry's hand, he flew down to where Flint was standing, a deranged smile upon the captain's face. Landing before him, Harry opened his palm, revealing a blood-streaked snitch.

Flint let out a booming laugh.

"For a snotnose first-year, you fly like the fuckin' wind," the captain complimented. "I guess yer the new Seeker."

Draco, watching this from the air, clearly wasn't pleased by the decision.

"We had a deal, Flint!" Draco accused, his face even paler than normal.

"Fuck yer deal!" Flint roared. "What fuckin' good are new brooms if yer seeker can't see a bludger comin'?"

"You can't do this, Potter!" Draco shouted, violently jabbing his finger in Harry's direction.

"I warned you about the bludger," Harry reminded. "If you listened to me, none of this would have happened."

"Why would I listen to you?" Draco spat. "I know you wanted the seeker spot!"

"Bloody hell, Draco! I don't like you, but that doesn't mean I want you seriously hurt!"

Draco scoffed in response.

"Like I believe that. I saw what you could do Tuesday night. From now on, you better watch your back, Potter."

Harry began to lose his patience. Perhaps he had been out of line, but every one of their spats had been instigated by Draco.

"I would think twice before doing anything," Harry coldly stated. "What you saw the other night is only a small taste of what I can do."

An evil smile found its way onto Draco's face at the statement.

"Potter, you're not even going to see me coming the next time I come after you."

His threat delivered, Draco abruptly turned his broom around and headed back towards the school.

Harry initially found himself dismayed at the level their antagonism had apparently reached, but then again, Draco hadn't exactly proved to be a formidable opponent, and it wasn't like he could improve overnight.

Could he?

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

September 17, 1991

In the three days following the Slytherin Quidditch tryouts, Harry was constantly on edge. His sleep was fragmented, amounting to little more than cat-naps. However, despite Draco's vow, nothing had happened.

This was quite the disturbing development, since it suggested Draco did have some sort of long-term plan, and had developed the patience to not rush it. Even his verbal barbs seemed to be more cutting, more intelligent than previous, spoken with a confidence that no longer rang false.

And to top it all off, he had to deal with History of Magic.

Harry, in two weeks time, had endured enough of Professor Binns to last a lifetime. The monotonous, droning voice, the lack of life contained within the material, and the warm room combined to make an absolutely untenable learning situation. In his current sleep deprived state, just holding his head up was an achievement of monumental proportions.

At first, Harry had played the part of the attentive student, and sat up front. He quickly found out that Binns would not have registered his presence even if he hung from the ceiling during the class. After the third class, his will to pay attention had been crushed, prompting Tracey and himself to grab a desk at the back of the room. It also inspired him to do some research.

"Regio arcana," Harry whispered while concentrating fiercely. The incantation spoken, an invisible, expanding force blossomed around Harry.

"Did you feel that?" Harry whispered to Tracey.

"Yeah, I did. Do you think it worked?" she asked anxiously.

Harry shrugged in response, and began to knock on the desk. With no reaction from the immediate vicinity, Harry began to pound the

desk as hard as he could, but there was still no reaction from any of the members of the class.

"Slytherin was a muggleborn!" Harry yelled, causing Tracey to wince. Yet again, there wasn't a single reaction from either his classmates or the transparent professor.

"Wow, you actually did it," Tracey said, clearly amazed by the accomplishment.

Harry, smiling, leaned back in his chair, setting it against the rear wall.

"Not having to pay attention to Binns was a great motivator."

Tracey snorted.

"It probably didn't hurt to have a famous wizard as your guardian."

"No, it didn't," Harry replied with a grin.

Though they were in the back of the class, away from the scrutiny of almost everyone, they were not completely hidden. Taking no pains to subdue their movements, Millicent was staring at him and Tracey with apparent confusion. He had been meaning to invite her to their occasional study group, but the notion had slipped his mind as of late.

Harry only thought for a moment before waving the hulking girl over. She looked surprised by the gesture, and for a single moment, grateful. He had to stifle a laugh as Millicent attempted to discreetly move her gargantuan form to their desk, all while dragging a chair over with her.

"How were you able to tear yourself from Binns' captivating lesson?" Harry deadpanned upon Millicent's arrival.

"Did you really just perform a privacy charm?" she asked, ignoring Harry's remark.

"Why yes I did. Feel free to admit your undying love for Draco, no one will hear it."

Millicent chortled at the notion.

"Thanks for the mental image. How'd you figure out the privacy charm?" she asked, clearly fixated on the how.

"Anything is possible, once you've given yourself completely to the dark," Harry whispered, a cruel smile upon his face. It did not last long, as both he and Tracey began to laugh. After a few moments, he commenced with the real explanation

"Well, the third class with Binns was the last straw. Because of my insomnia, I have a lot of time during the night, so I tried to learn the privacy charm."

"But isn't it really difficult?" Millicent asked.

"The charm's easy," Harry replied, "it's just defining the boundaries of the charm that's hard. I had to learn to only push a certain amount of magic into the spell, or the area would be too big."

"Just so you know, Millicent, once you get him started on his favorite subject, himself, he won't stop," Tracey warned.

"Please, call me Millie," she replied. "People calling me Millicent makes me feel like a stuffy pureblood."

"Millie it is, then," Harry agreed. "Don't pay any attention to the blond midget next to me; she likes to make stuff up about people to feel important."

Tracey sent a glare in his direction, but Harry pretended not to see it.

"Unfortunately, the charm isn't perfect. People can still see us, so it really only works at the back of the room, and we still have to act mostly normal, but I'm working on it."

"Still pretty impressive," Millicent complimented, "but isn't Binns going to notice that you're talking instead of listening?"

Tracey laughed derisively.

"Millie, are you serious? It's a ghost. What motivation does it have to make sure we're paying attention? What, is Dumbledore going to cut Binns' pay if too many students fail his course?"

Millicent nodded at her explanation, but clearly wasn't convinced.

"So you two aren't concerned about failing this class? Because even though the class sucks, I still want to pass it."

"It's a legitimate point," Harry conceded with a smile. "But I know of some history texts that are pretty good. If you order them, you'll be fine. My guardian said that Binns hasn't changed his routine in hundreds of years, and already told me what to study on the exams."

Millicent whistled, clearly impressed. Perenelle wouldn't have been happy if she had learned that Nicolas had provided him with the exact course outline and exam material, but it was too good of an opportunity to pass up.

"How far do you guys plan to take this?" Millicent asked in a whisper, leaning towards them.

Tracey shrugged in response.

"As far as we can."

"Binns may not care if we talk, but there's a good chance he might say something if we started to do work during class. Just imagine how nice it would be to have a nice, quiet place to do homework, as opposed to struggling to stay awake through Binns' lectures" Harry continued, elaborating on Tracey's less-than-informative reply. "It would leave us with more free time outside the classroom. Not bad, eh?"

Millicent smiled radiantly, an expression that looked alien upon the almost perpetually sulking girl's features. It did wonders for her, softening the rather harsh contours of her face. Calling it attractive would have been incorrect, but she actually looked pleasant, someone you might be able to have a few laughs with.

"You know, that would be very nice indeed."

"So, do you want in?" Tracey asked, examining her fingernails in a nonchalant fashion.

"Definitely."

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Bit-by-bit, Harry began to become accustomed to the Hogwarts routine. By September's end, he was widely acknowledged as being among the most intelligent of Hogwarts' students, with only Hermione, Tracey and Su Li matching the grades that he achieved.

In terms of magical skill, Harry was completely untouchable. Transfiguration was an utter breeze for him. While during the first class Professor McGonagall had been relatively cool to him, his prowess with Transfiguration thawed the icy exterior, despite his proclivity for not taking anything seriously. It was rare that a class passed without Harry earning at least some points for Slytherin.

He had similar reputations within Charms and Defense Against the Dark Arts. Professor Flitwick, with his laid back and chipper demeanor, had taken a shine to him immediately. Out of all the Hogwarts classes, Harry enjoyed charms the most. Flitwick actually tried to make his classes fun, which was appreciated vastly by all students.

Quirrell was something of an oddity. There was no one thing that he could pin down about the professor, but there were certain things that did just did not add up. For instance, he couldn't ignore that Quirrell had scheduled the extra first-year class on the night that the Gryffindors happened to have astronomy. Or the burning pain emanating from his scar whenever Quirrell raised his wand against Harry during demonstrations.

There was no denying the man knew his stuff, however, so Harry didn't let the inconsistencies interfere with his studies. Even though he had learned a lot from Nicolas and Perenelle, Quirrell's extra-classes still challenged him in ways he never expected. Still, with each passing class he edged closer to taking Quirrell up on his open-door policy, and asking a few innocent questions.

Potions was, well, Potions. He clearly had an aptitude for it, but Snape was a far larger obstacle than the material itself. As boring as

it became, Harry found the only way to really get along in Snape's class was to keep his head down, and just follow the directions. While clearly still possessed of a strong bias against James Potter's son, Snape mostly left him alone if he shut his mouth and did his work.

History of Magic, Astronomy, Magical Ethics and Herbology all went smoothly. The latter was made vastly easier by Neville's advanced knowledge of the subject. Harry considered himself fairly knowledgeable due to his time spent with Perenelle, but Neville made him look like a complete novice. The first three classes were barely worthy of mention, aside from Harry making no progress on finding a way to improve upon his initial privacy charm idea.

Millicent, or Millie as she wished to be called, became the unofficial member of Harry and Tracey's first-year Slytherin group. She seemed to fit well with them, as well as Hermione and Neville during their occasional group study sessions.

With great relief, Harry found the school's paranoia regarding his ties to the Dark Arts begin to fade. While there was still the occasional Gryffindor that would throw dirty looks in his direction, the school as a whole seemed to accept him, and no longer treated him as a pariah. It occurred to Harry that taking Tracey's advice, and not killing anyone, really did work out smashingly. He supposed it might start to flare up again if the Prophet started slandering him again, but they had precious little material to work with.

He kept up a weekly correspondence with Nicolas and Perenelle, though his accounts of Hogwarts were filtered as to exclude the less than flattering aspects of the school. They had been surprised to discover he had been sorted into Slytherin, but had nothing negative to say about it.

The dreams, always the same, persisted. He had considered going to the Headmaster, and asking for permission to speak to the hat, but he always found an excuse not to do so. Besides, they were only dreams, right?

Quidditch practice was an absolute nightmare. Each practice was an endurance test of sorts, where each team member tried to outmaneuver Flint's volatile temper and random psychotic outbursts. With the first game of the season approaching, against Gryffindor,

Harry found himself dreading the practices more and more. He actually considered skipping some of the practices, but his healthy fear of Flint stayed his hand.

Draco though, still unnerved him. The spoiled boy had seemed to use his defeat on the Quidditch pitch as a motivational tool, and had pushed himself. No longer was he prone to digging his own grave with his mouth, but was more restrained in his speech. Still, the longer the year stretched without retribution, the more Harry began to tell himself that maybe, just maybe, Draco had matured to the point where revenge was no longer that important.

This illusion was shattered halfway through October.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

October 18, 1991

"Why are almost all of the Potions we brew completely useless?" Tracey griped as she measured pomegranate juice for their current concoction.

Harry snickered at her complaint.

"What, you don't think you'll be using a Heartburn-Inducing Potion on a regular basis?"

"No, I don't think so," Tracey answered with a frown. "This is so stupid."

"You know you're looking at this class completely wrong, right?" Harry asked with a sigh, the good humor gone.

"How so?"

"As much as I agree that Snape is a mean, unfair wanker, his core approach to the class is good. We're first years, Tracey! Most students have never brewed a potion in their lives before Hogwarts. The simple potions, the exact instructions, it's all so that we can get used to the brewing process, and begin to learn about potions ingredients."

At Harry's loud declaration, Snape's head shot up.

"Potter, you're here to brew potions, not socialize," Snape coolly chastised. Harry thought this rather unfair, considering that they were being no louder than any of the other groups, but getting fair treatment from Snape wasn't something one expected when bearing the last name 'Potter'.

"I'm sorry, sir," Harry half-heartedly apologized.

"Since it would appear that yourself and Miss Davis do more socializing than brewing, for the duration of today's class you will be changing partners. Finnegan, switch places with Potter."

"What did I do wrong?" Seamus whined before he could stop himself.

"One point from Gryffindor for insubordination," Snape decreed. "If you don't get moving now, it will be more."

Fuming, Seamus picked up his school-bag and stomped over to Tracey's desk, slamming his stuff down.

"Two points from Gryffindor for acting like a toddler," Snape said, a cruel smile upon his face.

Harry had already begun to move, and placed his own stuff next to Seamus' former Potions partner, who had an intense look of dislike upon his face.

Ron Weasley.

Not exactly Harry's first choice for a potential Potions partner, but it did provide an opportunity to try to reason with one of the Gryffindor ringleaders.

"I don't think we've been properly introduced," Harry said after setting down his stuff. "I'm Harry Potter," he said, offering his outstretched hand.

Ron eyed the hand suspiciously, but seemed unwilling to turn aside a courteous gesture.

"Ron Weasley," he blurted out, letting go of Harry's hand so quickly, one might have thought it was on fire.

"Was that really that painful?" Harry asked with a slight smile.

"Can we just start working?" Ron asked, his ears slowly reddening.

"Sure," Harry replied, deducing that embarrassing Ron any further wouldn't be very diplomatic. "What step are you on?" he asked, motioning to the instructions upon the chalkboard.

"Um, the first one," Ron admitted, his ears maintaining their crimson hue. No wonder Snape didn't seem to be fond of Weasley.

On that note, they began to work on the Heartburn-Inducing Potion. While Ron didn't seem to have any flair for the subject, he allowed him to do at least some of the work. If Snape saw that Harry was doing all the work, he probably wouldn't hesitate to give them both zeros for the day.

Though the work was almost completely silent, Ron's scowl loosened as the class progressed. Harry found himself relieved that Ron was capable of being civil if the occasion called for it. After a half-hour, the potion was almost completely done. Ron, however, insisted on doing all the measurement himself.

"You do know I'm not going to poison or sabotage my own potion, right?" Harry asked.

Ron looked annoyed at Harry's point.

"Look, I don't know what you're going to do. I don't trust you, Potter."

"So you believe the Prophet's lies?" Harry asked, turning to face his partner.

"I don't know what to believe," Ron admitted. "They say you're the next Dark Lord, but you just seem like an average, slimy Slytherin."

Harry sighed deeply. The irony of the 'slimy Slytherin' label being an improvement was not lost upon him.

"To me, you just seem like an average Gryffindor, rushing to judgment without thinking it through. Isn't insulting each other's House fun?"

Ron opened his mouth to retort, but then closed it. He appeared to think for a moment, before speaking.

"Okay, so maybe you being the next Dark Lord doesn't make a lot of sense. Why does the Prophet say all this bad stuff, then? I mean, there must be at least some truth to it, right?"

Harry supposed that when put in that light, combined with Gryffindor's natural dislike for Slytherin...well, it was still stupid, but slightly more justified.

"Not really," Harry started, "you see..."

He trailed off as he caught movement at the edge of his peripheral vision. Turning slightly, he saw Malfoy had his wand raised and was moving slowly to his right, all while concentrating fiercely. Beads of perspiration stood out on his brow. It seemed awfully similar to the wand-movements that a novice would use on a levitation charm. Right as he made the connection, Malfoy caught Harry staring, and let out a sinister smile.

Harry spun around quickly, just in time to see an unknown floating object begin to fall into his cauldron.

"Get down!" Harry yelled, lunging at Ron. Before the redhead could react, Harry hit him like a freight train, tackling him and driving the wind from his lungs. The potion ignited behind them, splattering a soupy liquid everywhere, including the exposed skin of his face and hands. He let out a mingled cry of pain and surprise as his flesh began to burn intensely, quickly followed by the appearance of angry red boils.

Fortunately for Ron, Harry's body had shielded him from the worst of the splatter. The redhead looked around, confused, before seeing the seething boils on Harry's flesh.

"Blimey Potter, are you okay?"

Harry got up without answering, a cold rage spreading across his mind.

"One would hope that this would serve as a reminder to actually bother to follow the instructions," Snape stated, a smug expression upon his face.

While Harry had originally planned on going over to Malfoy and throttling him, Snape's gloating diverted his attention. He stopped mid-step, and spun around, facing the Potions Master.

"How much did Lucius pay you off to help out his hopeless son, professor?" Harry asked coolly.

Snape's face revealed nothing at Harry's declaration.

"Just like your father, Potter, you never cease to blame others for your own pathetic shortcomings."

"I wonder what Dumbledore would think about you helping Draco attack me," Harry mused. "I think I'm going to go find out," Harry concluded, turning his back on the professor.

"You've just earned yourself a detention for threatening a teacher," Snape spat.

"We'll see about that," Harry replied without turning around, continuing his march out of the Potions classroom. He stopped at Draco, who looked absolutely thrilled with the recent turn of events.

"This isn't over, Malfoy," Harry stated, staring into Draco's unblinking grey eyes.

"For once, you're completely right, Potter," Draco replied. "It's only beginning."

Harry stormed out of the classroom without replying to Draco's remark, his mind racing.

How badly had he underestimated Draco?

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The boils on his face and arms, quite painful to begin with, increased in discomfort by the time he arrived at the infirmary. Madam Pomfrey took one look at him, and quickly ushered him to a bed, muttering

under her breath about dangerous potions. Thankfully, she seemed to have a salve that immediately dispersed the painful boils.

Through it all, Tracey was by his bedside. She stood silently as Pomfrey gave Harry a stern warning about being careful with potions before releasing him.

"Are you okay?" Tracey asked carefully once they exited the infirmary.

"I'm still really fucking pissed, but I'm getting better," Harry answered, visions of smashing both Draco and Snape's faces dancing in his mind.

"Do you really think Snape helped Draco?"

Harry sighed, trying to exhale his anger.

"Yeah, I really do. I'm going to Dumbledore's office, to see if I can get that greasy sheep-fucker thrown out of Hogwarts."

"Do you want me to go with you?" Tracey offered, to which Harry shook his head.

"No, can you just go to our next class, and tell Professor Sprout I won't be there? Tell her I'm still in the infirmary."

Tracey nodded.

"Yeah, no problem. Well, um...good luck, Harry," she finished awkwardly, before turning around and making her way to Herbology.

During the summer, Dumbledore had given him the exact location of the Headmaster's office, should he ever have need for anything. Already knowing where the office was, it didn't take long for him to find the large gargoyle which marked it. Madam Pomfrey had been kind enough to give him the password back at the infirmary.

"Ice mice," Harry said, feeling slightly silly for talking to the stone object. It did slide away, however, allowing access to a stone spiral staircase which wound upwards. Upon stepping on the first step, they began to move upwards. At the top of the staircase was a

heavy-looking oak door with a brass knocker set into it, in the shape of a griffin.

Feeling like an intruder, Harry knocked upon the door a single time. Immediately, a voice muffled by the door bade him to enter. Taking a deep breath, Harry entered into the Headmaster's office.

It was a large, circular room, with various paintings of snoozing witches and wizards adorning the walls. Several thin-legged tables held strange whirring instruments of unidentifiable origin. On the far wall was a large shelf that contained a sword encased in glass, along with several other valuable-looking objects, but Harry only had eyes for the object on the middle shelf.

The Sorting Hat.

There it was, the object with the power to unlock the mysteries of his mind. Harry had discreetly been searching for the Sorting Hat throughout the year, but had never thought to look in the Headmaster's Office, which was in retrospect the most obvious spot.

"Good morning, Harry," Dumbledore welcomed from behind his enormous, claw-footed desk. "Please, have a seat," he offered, motioning to a chair on Harry's side of the desk.

Harry took Dumbledore up on his offer, thanking him as he sat down in the comfortable chair.

"How are you enjoying your first year at Hogwarts?" Dumbledore asked kindly.

Harry, who had been prepared to rant about Snape, was unprepared for the pleasantries, and was less than eloquent in his answer.

"Um, it's been good, sir," he lamely answered.

Dumbledore seemed unconcerned with the lack of enthusiasm in Harry's answer.

"I'm very pleased to hear that. You certainly seem to have been keeping yourself busy. Between being the youngest Seeker in a century, the extra Defense class, and your fine academic

performance, you're making quite the reputation for yourself here at Hogwarts."

"I guess you've been keeping tabs on me, then, sir?" Harry asked, finally cracking a smile.

"I keep tabs on all of my students, Harry," Dumbledore stated cryptically. "How are you feeling after this morning's ordeal?"

"I guess Snape wanted to make sure he told his side of the story first," Harry spat bitterly.

"Professor Snape is a valued member of our faculty, Harry, and I must ask that you address him as such, regardless of the differences between the two of you."

Harry wasn't exactly fond of referring to the Potions Master in a respectful fashion, but didn't want to clash with Dumbledore, for whom he did the utmost respect.

"Fine, Professor Snape," Harry conceded, "what did he say happened?"

Dumbledore folded his fingers into a steeple, and sighed deeply before replying.

"Professor Snape claims that you mistakenly placed some pufferfish parts in your completed Heartburn-Inducing Potion, causing it to become volatile, and erupt over yourself and Mister Weasley. He referenced your poor academic performance as being the probable culprit."

Harry let out a groan, unable contain his frustration.

"Sir, would someone who spent an entire year learning from Nicolas Flamel make such a stupid mistake? You know, the famous alchemist?"

"As you well know, I am certainly aware of who Nicolas Flamel is," Dumbledore stated, a stern expression upon his face. "I admit that Professor Snape may be slightly biased in his account, however, so please, give me your account of today's events."

Harry did so with great relish, detailing the events of the morning's Potions class in detail. Dumbledore said nothing during the account, which unnerved Harry slightly, but he continued onwards, ending his story with stating that he wasn't going to attend Snape's detention.

"While I am sympathetic to your plight, I regret to inform you that you will be attending Professor Snape's detention."

"But sir!" Harry exclaimed, "even if I can't prove Snape did anything, I saw Draco levitating something into my cauldron! Do you think I'm lying?"

Dumbledore shook his head.

"No, rest assured, I do believe you. However, the situation is more complicated than you realize, Harry."

Harry, livid that his story was being ignored, made to stand.

"No, I understand completely, sir. You'd rather sweep this under the rug than do anything about a professor that helps to attack students."

"Sit down, Mister Potter!" Dumbledore ordered sharply, all traces of good cheer gone from his expression. Harry, suddenly afraid that he had pushed the Headmaster too far, sat down.

"As antagonistic as your and Professor Snape's relationship may be, I refuse to believe that Severus would willingly help a student to attack another," Dumbledore calmly explained. "It is far more likely that Mister Malfoy was merely biding his time until a good opportunity presented itself."

"What about Malfoy then!" Harry exclaimed.

"Though I am certainly advanced in my years, I assure that your hearing is still perfectly adequate. Any further conversation will be conducted at normal volume. Are we clear on this matter, Harry?"

"Yes, I'm sorry for my outburst sir," Harry apologized.

"Thank you for your apology," Dumbledore said quietly. "Sadly, your actions against Mister Malfoy during the flying lessons had far-

reaching repercussions. Upon learning his son had received a stinging hex to the face, his father, Lucius Malfoy, sought to have you prosecuted under international wizarding law."

"He actually went to his father?" Harry asked incredulously.

"Indeed he did. The elder Malfoy was quite adamant that you face some sort of punishment."

"Sir, you need to know," Harry spoke quickly, "I conjured the shield to protect Tracey from the stinging hex Malfoy cast at her. It bounced off and hit Malfoy."

"Is that so, Harry? So you claim that Draco getting struck in the face was entirely accidental?"

Harry sighed deeply, unwilling to lie to the Headmaster.

"No, it wasn't," he admitted. "I was angry that he threatened Tracey, so I wanted to show him that it was a bad idea to fling hexes at me and my friends."

"And?" Dumbledore prompted, clearly wanting more.

"It was a stinging hex, not the killing curse," Harry slowly said.

Dumbledore sighed.

"That's not the point, Harry. You could have easily deflected the spell into off into the sky, but you chose to send it back at Draco. I question the wisdom of that decision, when you are fully aware there are factions out there that would exploit any occurrence, no matter how small, to make your life more difficult."

As much as he hated to admit it, Dumbledore was right. Taking a deep breath, he readied his apology.

"I'm sorry, sir; that was wrong of me."

"Indeed it was," Dumbledore agreed, "but I do acknowledge that your heart was in the right place. I wouldn't have defended you to the Hogwarts Board of Governors and the Ministry if I believed you had actually attacked young Malfoy. However, you are more than

capable of learning from your mistakes, so I will bargain with Lucius Malfoy."

"How so?"

"I was only able to delay action on behalf of the Hogwarts Board of Governors, not neutralize it. Now that I have proof that young Mister Malfoy put other students at harm, I will agree to forgo any punishments upon his son if Lucius agrees to stop pressuring the board into taking action any against you."

Harry was stunned. Had it really gotten that bad without him knowing it? And what about the Ministry?

"Thank you for defending me sir, but where does the Ministry fit into this?"

Dumbledore took off his glasses and began to rub his eyes.

"Minister Fudge has been quite adamant about extracting you from Hogwarts, and bringing you in for questioning," Dumbledore stated gravely. "He has the support of the Hogwarts Board of Governors, as well as the Ministry, but luckily, I still have final say over all Hogwarts' students."

"Wait, how can he do this, aren't I a French citizen, and outside Ministry control?" Harry asked, very concerned about his future.

"Harry, Cornelius Fudge is a dangerous man. He is prideful, a vicious politician and still has the support of the corrupt Ministry that he has built up. I do not wish to scare you, Harry, as he most likely would not resort to kidnapping you, for fear of causing an international incident, but I would advise you to stay alert at all times."

"That's all you have for me?" Harry erupted, forgetting his earlier agreement. "I sleep with one eye open, since half of my Housemates are after me! The Slytherin prefects even told me that they're planning a payback! I've got a Potions professor that hates me! Half the school thinks I'm a Dark Lord, and now you say the Ministry 'might' try to kidnap me? 'Most likely' is not good enough!"

Breathing raggedly after his rant, Harry caught his breath for a moment, still seething. After all he had been through this semester, Dumbledore had the gall to tell him to just hope for the best? Fuck that.

"Forgive me, Harry, but it appears that I have severely underestimated the depth of your problems with the other Slytherins. What leads you to believe that you would be harmed within your own dormitory?"

Harry, rather beyond caring about courtesy, snorted in response.

"Because it happened a few weeks ago. They crept up to my bed in the middle of the night, using a night-vision spell. I just used a light spell to blind them all. I could have done much worse, but I wanted to give them a chance."

Dumbledore was silent at Harry's story, head bowed, apparently deep in thought. After a few moments, he raised his head.

"I must commend your actions, Harry. Though you could have hurt them badly, claiming self-defense, you chose a more peaceful resolution. Would it ease your mind at all if I personally warded your bed?"

Harry's first thought was that Dumbledore's offer didn't really help him out much with Snape or any outside attacks, but it was a good first step.

"It would help out," Harry admitted, "but I'm still worried about...Professor Snape."

Dumbledore started to reply, but he was interrupted.

"Albus!" yelled a voice on the wall, without warning. Swinging his head wildly to the side, Harry found the source to be a portrait of an elderly wizard, where before there had only been a blank canvas.

"Two seventh-year Ravenclaw students have broken into the third-floor corridor!"

Dumbledore immediately jumped up and addressed the painting.

"How long ago?"

"Only a minute, sir. I think they were looking for a...quiet place," the elderly wizard finished, taking notice of Harry's presence.

Dumbledore relaxed slightly, and let out a low chuckle.

"Ah, young love," he stated with a twinkle in his eye, before turning his attention to Harry. "I must address this immediately, Harry. Come back later, and we'll go over the particulars of your sleeping arrangement. Please see yourself out once you're ready."

Without further delay, Dumbledore bounded down the stairs, out of sight.

Deep in thought, Harry barely heard the gargoyle slide back into place. His mind was focused on a memory during his time with the Flamels, where Dumbledore had mentioned something about hiding the Stone. Could Dumbledore have actually hid the Stone at Hogwarts?

It seemed unlikely, crazy even, but if Dumbledore wanted to make sure it was safe, was there a better place for it? Harry thought not. Letting his eyes drift, his gaze settled upon the Sorting Hat. At first he banished the thought of donning it, before quickly rationalizing that he would get no better opportunity to converse with the hat, and maybe find out what lurked inside his mind.

His decision made, Harry got up and plucked the Sorting Hat from its shelf. With a deep breath, he placed it upon his head.

"Fancy seeing you here, Mister Potter," the Sorting hat greeted.

"I don't have much time, can you give me the combination to the lock?" he begged.

"Absolutely not," the hat replied. "Even if I were comfortable with you knowing what was inside your mind, I assure you, if confronted with the truth all at once, you would be driven insane."

"It can't be that bad," Harry argued.

"Oh, it most certainly can Harry. You've been having some bad dreams as of late, haven't you?"

Harry chose not to answer.

"I see it all in your head, Mr. Potter. The visions that drive you from slumber, in terror, are mild compared to some of the terrors that reside within your mind."

"Maybe that's why I'm having these dreams! Maybe my mind is trying to warn me of something!"

The hat was silent for a moment, as if in contemplation. When it spoke, its voice was grave.

"Listen to me very carefully, Mr. Potter. The visions you see in your dreams...are not memories. Something...something is trying to communicate with you, Harry, but it does not wish you well."

"Wait, how could someone implant visions in my mind?" Harry asked, confused.

"I have nothing more to say on the matter, Harry, just know that my judgment is final. Harry, please listen to me," the hat urged. "You're a bright, talented individual, with a good soul, despite all that's happened to you. You can have a good, nay, a great life if you're willing to leave your past alone."

"And if I don't?" Harry asked.

"That's a question you don't want to know the answer to, Mister Potter, but I've said my piece for now."

From that point on, the hat ignored him, despite begging the it for more information. After a few minutes, he gave up, and placed the hat back upon its proper shelf.

"I'm sorry, but I can't let it go," Harry said to the hat, before leaving the Headmaster's Office.

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Author Notes:

Again ahead of schedule. Maybe I am getting faster. I'm going to make an attempt to update next Friday, so we'll see how that goes. Obviously, this is all dependent upon how real-life goes.

My version of Marcus Flint was inspired by BigDonaDiet, from his story, "What Would Slytherin Harry do?" Check it out, it's a great read.

Any comments, suggestions or criticisms would be deeply appreciated, and inspire me to write as opposed to playing video games. I'll make an effort to answer every review I get.

Thanks to my co-conspirator, darklordmike, for his valuable assistance with plotting, characterization, continuity and grammar. His efforts save me a ridiculous amount of time with the editing process, and are deeply appreciated.

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Eleventh Movement: Lost in Reflection

October 25, 1991

Spending a perfectly good Friday night in the company of the Potions Master was certainly not an ideal way to kick off the weekend, but Harry had little choice in the matter. The best he could do was just to try to enjoy the time he had before detention.

In a lapse of discipline, Harry checked his watch again.

Seven-thirty. Wonderful.

"Was it really worth going to Dumbledore?" Tracey asked suddenly, looking up from her Transfiguration book.

Harry nodded.

"Finally being able to sleep with both eyes closed would have been worth a week of detention."

What he left unsaid was that he had also learned a lot about Dumbledore. For whatever reason, the Headmaster wouldn't hear a negative word against the Potions Master. He realized that he'd have to be very wary of Snape, since he couldn't really defend himself against the unfair accusations.

"Have there been any problems since Dumbledore warded your bed?" Millicent asked.

"No," Harry replied, shaking his head. "The ward acts like an invisible barrier to everyone but me. All Dumbledore needed were a few drops of blood from me."

Millicent's mouth fell open in surprise.

"What?" Harry asked, "isn't that normal for wards?"

"Harry, did Dumbledore put blood wards around your bed?" she asked, clearly in awe.

"I'm not sure," Harry replied while shrugging, not knowing a great deal about wards. "All I know is that my roommates have not been able to pass it."

"Blood wards are extremely powerful," Millicent explained. "Dumbledore must be really serious about protecting you."

"He has to be," Harry reasoned. "He knows that if I didn't feel safe here, I might go to Beauxbatons instead."

"I'm really glad you're staying here," Tracey said with a slight smile upon her face. "If the other Slytherins don't have you to obsess over, they'd actually remember to make fun of my blood status."

Tracey wasn't exaggerating. The other Slytherins had not taken kindly to Harry having his own personal ward, and the majority of his House had been rather hostile to him as of late.

"That's okay, I'll just win them all back with a stunning Quidditch victory next week," Harry claimed, bringing laughter to the group. "Well, I should get going. Snape might try to give me another detention if I'm a second late."

After saying his goodbyes, Harry took his leave from the common room, and made his way to the Potions classroom. He had been absolutely dreading this moment all week, wondering if Snape would keep him past midnight. He certainly wouldn't put it past the miserable prick.

Arriving at the door, Harry took a deep breath, and once again reminded himself that if he didn't keep his cool, more detentions could be on the horizon.

Snape, greasy black hair dangling just above the desk, looked up from the papers he was grading upon Harry's entrance. With a vindictive smirk, he motioned toward a barrel near the storeroom entrance.

"Drag that over here, Potter," he said dismissively, pointing to the desk closest to his. "And do take care not to spill it. It would be such a...shame if you had to clean up its contents," he finished with an evil leer.

Feeling very apprehensive of what horrors Snape had in store for him, Harry began to drag the heavy barrel over. It was a struggle the entire way, but he made sure to be careful, the sickening stench wafting from within the barrel suggesting it would be very unpleasant to clean up if spilled. The muscles of his arms and back burning, Harry made the final push with a grunt, before leaning against the desk, completely out of breath.

Ignoring him, Snape ripped off the barrel's cover with a wave of his wand, causing Harry, even in his exhausted state, to reel back in disgust. Within was a tangled mass of amphibious limbs, emitting a stench that almost caused him to lose his dinner.

"My own stores are abysmally low," Snape explained with an expression close to joy, "so therefore I need you refill my supply of fresh toad intestines."

"Are you serious?" Harry asked incredulously, still too sickened to react in a coherent fashion.

"I know etiquette often eludes you, Potter," Snape spat, "but when addressing me, you shall refer to me as 'sir'."

"I'm sorry, sir," Harry said mechanically.

"In response to your original question, no, I just had a barrel of dead toads imported for my own amusement," Snape scorned. "If this task is perhaps too menial for you, I can provide one far more challenging."

With a scowl, Harry picked up the serrated knife in his right hand, a toad in his left. It was a struggle not to retch upon picking up the slimy, squishy form, but he managed to block out the stench long enough to squeeze it tightly, and prepare to slit its stomach open.

However, as soon as he bore down with his grip, it exploded within his hand, guts and putrid fluid splashing to the floor below, leaving him with a deflated husk. His gorge rising, he turned from the mess, and stared at the ceiling.

"Potter, do take care with the toads," Snape smugly remarked. "They were packaged with an anti-coagulant potion, which, while preserving the innards, does make for a far more delicate operation."

If you can't curb your clumsiness, I fear another detention may be in order to clean up the mess you're bound to make."

With his final warning imparted, Snape retreated back to his desk to resume grading papers. Harry, left to his own devices, took a deep breath to center himself. Sure, this was completely fucking gross, but he was going to have to concentrate if he wanted to avoid another round of detention with Snape.

It was time-consuming, difficult and messy, but after four hours, he finally made his way through the barrel.

"Perhaps some things can penetrate the famously thick Potter skulls," Snape remarked upon inspecting the desk and finding it relatively free of gore. "Granted, a blind muggle could have done a better job."

"Can I go now?" Harry asked, ignoring the barb.

Snape sneered at his question.

"How alike your father you are, merely content to float through life in a haze of mediocrity."

Harry was well aware Snape was just trying to goad him into another detention, and opted to not reply.

"Insolent brat," Snape muttered in a bored tone. "Get out of my classroom."

Harry gladly complied, making a break for the door. He never would have guessed how good the dungeon hallways could smell after four hours slicing up dead toads.

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November 3, 1991

Hogwarts by night provided a sharp, pleasant contrast to the day. While normally the hallways would be congested with students, now there was only the serenity which accompanies nightfall. Beneath his invisibility cloak, Harry felt like an explorer, braving the depths of an undiscovered tomb.

After awakening from his customary four hours of sleep, he'd typically read or work on homework. However, occasionally, he got the urge to uncover the secrets of Hogwarts. After finding the second floor passage on his first full day, he had developed a thirst for exploration. He wasn't successful every night, but, at least once a week, he discovered some sort of secret passage or room.

In one of his recent letters to Nicolas, he had spoken of unlocking the secrets of Hogwarts. Nicolas had responded enthusiastically to Harry's conquests, and suggested a tracking spell. As a post-script, his guardian had mentioned that the kitchens were located beneath the Great Hall, and were always open to the enterprising explorer.

With every intention of finding the kitchen, Harry took the door to the right of the main staircase. Beyond was a corridor that sloped downward in a gradual grade. At the bottom, which he estimated was thirty feet below the Great Hall, Harry let out a deep breath, and used Nicolas' recommended spell.

"Vestigi delineo!"

A menagerie of footsteps, outlined in red, appeared for him, before quickly fading away. Nicolas had explained that the newer the steps, the brighter the imprint. With the variances in intensity he had seen in the footsteps, it looked like a fair bet that the spell was working perfectly.

He began to walk the hallways, occasionally casting the spell, keeping his ears strained for Filch or any prefects on duty. He was looking for footsteps that inexplicably seemed to lead into the walls, suggesting a passage.

Turning the corner, Harry cast the spell again, and was finally met with success. Angling off the main footpath and terminating before a painting were clear footmarks.

Anticipation flooding him, he leaned in closer to examine the painting in question. It was a large painting of a bowl of fruit, perhaps eight feet in height. Grapes, apples, bananas, oranges and a single pear were represented within the bowl. It clearly seemed to be the entrance to the kitchen, but Harry hadn't the faintest idea how to open it.

With no better idea, Harry began to run his hands over the smooth stone blocks on either side of the painting, looking for a trigger of some sorts, but his search was in vain. Maybe the mechanism was part of the painting itself?

Taking pains to be careful, Harry began to run his fingers lightly upon the canvas, looking for any irregularity. When his fingers danced over the pear, it squirmed lightly. With mounting excitement, he touched the same spot again, causing the pear to chuckle, and begin to transform. It shaped itself, growing out of the painting, until a doorknob jutted out of the previously flat surface.

Success!

Ecstatic, Harry turned the doorknob and stepped into the kitchens. He was surprised to discover that it was laid out in the exact same fashion as the Great Hall, with the five large tables all exactly mirroring their upstairs counterparts. A gigantic fireplace burned at the opposite end of the room, taking up almost the entire rear wall, while brass pots and pans lined the rest of the wall space.

Teeming between the tables, pots and fireplace were scores of house-elves, perhaps a hundred strong. Upon his arrival, a few of the house-elves ushered him to a small table nestled between two large piles of brass cookware.

"Is Master Potter wanting a sandwich?" one of the elves asked him in a high, squeaky voice.

"Um, yeah, sure, thanks," Harry inarticulately replied, surprised that even the Hogwarts house-elves knew him by name.

The house-elf perked up even further at his thanks, and rushed off. Harry certainly appreciated the service, but there was just something about their friendliness seemed off, exaggerated. The house-elf returned a mere thirty seconds later, sandwich in hand. Harry thanked the elf for the snack, and tore into it.

Halfway through the night-time snack, the entrance to the kitchen opened, admitting the wildly grinning Weasley twins.

"Well if it isn't little Harrykins, our resident Dark-Lord-in-training!" exclaimed one of the twins, grabbing a seat across from him.

"Indeed, George. The little tyke deserves congratulations at the large wave of discord he's managed to spread," Fred agreed, sitting next to him and throwing an arm around his shoulders.

"What for?" Harry asked, stoically trying to resist Fred's tightening right arm, which seemed suspiciously close to entrapping him in a noogey.

"For annoying Percy and Ron, of course!" George stated, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

Harry laughed at the source of their cheer.

"That's not fair, I blocked Ron from getting blasted by a botched potion," he claimed, feigning righteous indignation.

"Why yes you did," Fred agreed, "which has given us free reign to point out, at every opportunity, that he got saved by the new Dark Lord of Hogwarts."

"Though for some reason, Ronnikins doesn't seem to appreciate us pointing that fact out," George commented, his voice steeped in mock confusion.

"But that's nothing compared to how bad you've gotten under perfect prefect Percy's skin," added Fred.

Harry chuckled in response, not exactly surprised by the news.

"So I guess Percy's not too thrilled with me, eh?"

"That, my little evil friend, is a huge understatement," Fred clarified. "About a week ago, Percy came back to Gryffindor Tower practically frothing at the mouth, ranting about the Potter hooligan."

"Did he really call me a 'hooligan'?" Harry asked incredulously.

Both twins nodded enthusiastically.

"Our dear brother is starting to get a little obsessed," George explained. "He's always volunteering to take prefect rounds in the dungeons and around the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, just so that he'll have a chance to catch you out after curfew."

Harry whistled in response.

"He doesn't have better things to do?"

"You know, one would think that he might, but apparently not," said George.

"Why is he so obsessed with me? Don't other students make fun of him for his 'my-shit-doesn't-stink' attitude?"

The twins sighed whimsically, before both of them latched onto one of Harry's cheeks, giving them a quick pinch, which he was unable to avoid.

"See, Harry, that's why you're a shining example to the youth of Hogwarts," George commented as Harry was rubbing his cheeks. "Most kids are intimidated by rules and authority figures, afraid to say anything that might get them in trouble."

"You, however," Fred continued, "seem to thrive on bending rules and insulting authority figures that take themselves too seriously. We're so proud of our little Dark Lord!"

Harry danced out of the way before they could attack his cheeks again, but it was a close thing.

"Do you two ever feel guilty for hogging your family's sense of humor, leaving none for Ron and Percy?"

Both twins began to grin widely at Harry's question.

"Harry, if we only had enough humor in our family for two, it would be very grim at home. But, hey, ickie Ronnikins isn't that bad."

Fred seemed to re-consider his statement before backtracking.

"Well, okay, maybe he's bad, but he's not Percy terrible."

"Maybe, but what's the deal with his fear of Slytherins?" Harry asked while smiling.

The Weasleys burst out laughing at his question. It took them a few moments, but finally George was capable of speaking.

"We just may have spent our childhood making up horror stories about the evil Slytherins and all the terrible things they do to Gryffindors."

Harry groaned loudly at the revelation. No wonder Ron had issues with him!

Fred, sensing his unease, gave him a comforting pat on the shoulder.

"There there, Harry, don't despair! If you save Ronnikins' a few more times, he might be able to walk into a room without sneering at you."

"Well, it's nice there's a ray of light at the end of the tunnel," sighed Harry.

"That's the spirit!" George encouraged.

"So, Harry," Fred began, with a sly edge to his voice, "how does it feel to be the youngest Seeker in a century playing for the most psychotic Quidditch captain of the century?"

Harry smiled slightly at the abrupt change in questioning.

"It's long stretches of fear and dread broken up by senseless violence. Flint is absolutely terrifying, and I really don't want to see what he's like after a loss."

"So there's probably no way we're getting any inside information, then?" George asked.

Harry shook his head.

"Flint would definitely murder me if I said anything."

"Completely understandable," Fred consoled.

"But, there is something that the Gryffindors need to know."

The twins leaned forward at his statement, clearly interested.

"Your team needs to be really careful. Flint is looking to hurt your team badly. He came up with a new strategy, where the amount of players the other team loses is worth the penalty shots."

The twins whistled in appreciation.

"That's some pretty heavy stuff, Harry," Fred commented. "Why betray your team's strategy if you're so afraid of Flint?"

"As much as I like Quidditch, well, it's just a game, not really worth dying for," Harry explained.

At his statement, the twins covered their hearts with their hands.

"Bless his black little heart, George."

"Indeed, brother. Who would have guessed the Dark-Lord-in-training had a soft spot for human life?"

Harry smirked at their byplay.

"Besides, I'm just going to catch the snitch anyway."

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

November 8, 1991

After Flint's frightening pre-game speech, Harry stepped out of locker room. All throughout the week he had told himself his nerves wouldn't be a problem, that he could just mentally shut everything out.

His resolve abruptly disappeared mere seconds after stepping out into the frigid day. The roar of the crowd was like some immense monster, demanding a sacrifice. Nervously, he went to smooth his emerald-green Quidditch robes, only to find his hands were shaking. Maybe Flint would understand if he suddenly got too sick to play.

"Potter, get a fuckin' move on, we've got some Gryffindors to dismember," Flint roared from behind him.

Maybe not.

His daydream shattered, Harry began his approach towards the tsunami of cheers. With every step closer to the stadium he felt smaller, more insignificant. Ducking his head low, Harry ran out into the field, not wanting to acknowledge the crowd. Upon reaching the center, he chanced a look towards the stands.

It appeared that the entire school had shown up to witness his failure, as he didn't see a single empty seat in the entire stadium. Oddly, the Slytherin students for the most part were actually cheering at his presence on the field. The irony of the situation was not lost upon him, but it did indeed prove that you're indeed a Slytherin before anything else.

Madam Hooch, who appeared to be refereeing, impatiently awaited the arrival of all the players onto the field. While waiting, Harry tried to find his group of friends in the crowd, but the effort was in vain. His attention was brought back to the pitch when Hooch began to implore that she wanted a clean, fair game. Unsurprisingly, her statement seemed to be aimed at Flint. She then instructed them to mount their brooms, a silver whistle between her lips.

Harry swallowed heavily as she readied the whistle, mentally preparing himself for the start of the match. With the shrill shriek of her whistle, it began.

As Harry kicked off the ground, he began to leave his fear behind. After all, this was nothing to get nervous about, only a game with a bunch of flying balls. Feeling much more at ease, he began to ascend rapidly.

"And the Quaffle is taken immediately by Angelina Johnson of Gryffindor – what an excellent Chaser that girl is, and rather attractive, too -"

"JORDAN!"

"Sorry, Professor."

Another Gryffindor appeared to be doing the commentary, which seemed odd with regards to impartiality, but Harry shrugged it off, scanning the pitch for the golden Snitch. He rolled wildly to the side to avoid a Bludger before resuming his search, and noticed the Gryffindor Seeker had adopted his same strategy.

"And she's really belting up there, a neat pass to Alicia Spinnet, a good find of Oliver Wood's, last year only a reserve – back to Johnson and – no, the Slytherins have taken the Quaffle, Slytherin Captain Marcus Flint gains the Quaffle and off he goes – Flint flying like an eagle up there – he's going to score!"

Harry swung his head around to see Flint rapidly approaching the Gryffindor Keeper, Wood. Flint held off until the last second, firing the Quaffle as hard as he could into the Gryffindor's face. Wood's eyes only had time to widen before the Quaffle smashed into his face with a crunch and a spray of blood.

"NO! Flint just fired the Quaffle at Wood's face. That has to be a foul!"

A slightly aghast Harry watched as Hooch flew over to a nonchalant Flint, and warned him angrily, before awarding a penalty shot to Gryffindor. Flint pretended to rage at the decision, but was clearly content with the turn of events. Wood, blood dripping off his face and onto his robes stared back angrily, apparently too tense to feel pain.

"Penalty to Gryffindor! For that disgusting bit of cheating, it should have been two shots, but whatever, Spinnet puts it away easily, 10 – 0, Gryffindor, who's still in possession."

Unsurprisingly, Harry heard no reprimand from Professor McGonagall. Despite the deficit, the Slytherins were still cheering at Flint's actions, much to the chagrin of all the other Houses.

"Spinnet advances the Quaffle – back to Bell – no, Bell drops the Quaffle at Flint's charge! Pucey scoops the Quaffle, I guess a charge isn't a foul anymore, streaks down the pitch, and – oh no..."

Pucey scored easily, raising loud cheers from the Slytherin section and groans from everyone else. While Spinnet's back was turned to

watch the goal, Bole fired a Bludger at her, striking her in the right knee, eliciting a gasp of pain from Spinnet.

"That rotten cheater! Bole just fired a Bludger during a play stoppage! That has to be – yes, two penalty shots for Gryffindor!"

Bole tried to argue the point with Hooch, but she wasn't having any of it. As Hooch turned to give the Quaffle to Spinnet, Flint glared daggers at her, slicing his index finger across his throat. Spinnet, clearly unnerved, missed the first shot, bringing wild cheers from the Slytherin section. Harry used the stoppage to continue looking for the Snitch, but still hadn't seen anything.

"Come on Alicia, you can do this – and she does! 20 – 10, Gryffindor, still in possession. Bell advances the Quaffle – no, she lost it, nice Bludger work by that cheating scum Bole – sorry professor – Spinnet goes to retrieve possession – cut off by Montague, who flips it to Flint – stolen by Johnson! Fantastic work by the Gryffindor Chaser – open path to the goal, come on – NO! FOUL!"

No Bludger handy, Bole had launched his Beater's bat at Johnson's exposed back, hitting her between the shoulder blades, eliciting a cry of pain. Hooch began to berate Bole loudly, while awarding Gryffindor two penalty shots. At Bole's insistence that he mistook Johnson for a bludger, she added a third.

"That filthy, no-good, lying-"

The commentator was cut off as McGonagall silenced the rant, though she gave him back control within a few seconds.

"So, Bole almost kills Johnson, and that means three penalty shots. And she...oh no.."

Johnson, unable to properly move her arms, was barely able to throw the Quaffle, missing the first shot badly. Spinnet took over for her hurt teammate and made both of the shots easily.

"That a girl, Spinnet, teach those snakes a lesson! 40 – 10, Gryffindor still in possession."

Harry, watching it all, almost felt embarrassed to be on the same team as the rest of his fellow Slytherins. He certainly did warn the

twins. Shaking himself from his thoughts, he resumed his search of the Snitch.

"Spinnet in possession – no, Flint steals it from her, flanked by that cheater Bole – knocks away a nice Bludger by a Weasley – Weasley hits the Bludger back at – TAKE THAT!"

Fred had streaked after the Bludger, and rocketed it back at Bole, striking the Slytherin Beater in the shoulder, nearly knocking him off his broom. As a bonus, it even knocked the Quaffle from Flint's hands.

"Bell takes the Quaffle – watch out! – nice evasion by Bell of Derrick's Bludger! She shoots...she scores! 50 – 10 Gryffindor!"

The Gryffindors broke into wild cheers, their team starting to pull away. Glancing at the celebrating Chasers, Harry saw a flash of gold near the Slytherin end of the pitch. Accelerating rapidly, Harry tore after it, quickly followed by the Gryffindor Seeker.

"Oh no! Potter has seen the Snitch, and is after it! Stop him!"

Johnson, reduced to playing interference, flew quickly into his path. With a mere foot separating Harry and the Snitch, he wasn't about to be deterred. He made a slight adjustment at her attempt, barely missing her, her long braids whipping across his robes. The snitch within his grasp, Harry reached out, the Gryffindor Seeker hot on his tail.

Harry turned just as his hand closed around the Snitch, just in time to see the Gryffindor Seeker collide with Johnson, sending the Seeker flying off his broom.

Like a bad parody of Superman, the teenager went flying through the air, landing roughly on his right leg with a grotesque crack. For a brief moment, Harry saw the flesh of his leg split as the femur roughly tore through the muscle in a crimson spray, before the robes settled back into place, mercifully hiding the sight.

"Towler is down! Wait – he's moving! OUCH! That's got to hurt! Well, we all wish poor Kenneth a speedy recovery. Oh yeah, the slimy snakes win, 160 – 50."

Afterwards there was a blast of feedback as Lee threw the microphone down in disgust, but it was quickly drowned out by the intense booing by all three non-Slytherin Houses.

Still grasping the Snitch tightly, Harry flew down to the pitch and began to celebrate, despite the chorus of boos. Of far greater importance was the chant that had begun to emanate from the Slytherin stands.

"Pot-ter! Pot-ter! Pot-ter!"

So relieved was he by the praise that he barely felt it when Flint engulfed him in a bear hug.

"I'm glad I didn't have to kill ye for fuckin' up our match," Flint admitted. Sadly, Harry wasn't convinced the Slytherin Captain was joking.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

December 4, 1991

"Stupefy!"

A feeble, barely visible pink light left Zacharias' wand almost hesitantly, moving slowly through the air. It struck the target, dissipating with no discernible effect.

"You should really make the final thrust faster," Harry offered, seeing as how Smith's slow wand movements were robbing his spells of all their power.

"I don't think that's it," Zacharias countered. "Wand movements must be slow, precise, to properly channel magic."

"Maybe that works for Transfiguration, but not so much for spells requiring incantations. If your wand movements are perfect, why can't you perform a stunner?" Harry asked, tired of dancing around the obvious.

Zacharias sneered at his question, an expression that seemed to be almost permanent upon the blond boy's face.

"If you're such an expert at spells, why isn't it working?"

Harry quickly drew his wand and fired a lightning-quick stunner, felling the Hufflepuff before he had a chance to react. Looking to his side, he saw Quirrell give a nod of approval. Encouraged, Harry pointed his wand at Smith's unconscious body.

"Ennervate!"

Zacharias awoke immediately, eyeing Harry with barely concealed contempt.

"So, did you notice a difference between our two casting styles, besides the fact that I actually did it correctly?"

"You did it too quick for me to see," Zacharias snapped, clearly frustrated.

"That's the point," Harry pointed out. "Stunners are a pretty powerful spell for us first-years, so we need all of our power for it. When you cast slowly, the power is discharged slowly, instead of all at once, which is why your spells suck."

Zacharias, eyeing his wand distrustfully, tried Harry's suggested method, thrusting his wand out quickly.

"Stupefy!"

A crimson spell flew from his wand immediately, clipping the target. Zacharias looked angry for a moment, but it faded quickly.

"Thanks for the help," he said, swallowing his pride. The Hufflepuff boy was clearly a prideful blowhard, but Harry was encouraged by the thanks, as it displayed that sometimes he was willing to admit he was wrong.

"If you have any other questions, ask away," Harry remarked graciously.

"For a Dark Lord, you're pretty helpful," Zacharias commented with a slight smirk.

"Well, how else would I gain minions if I didn't wear a mask of helpfulness?"

Zacharias laughed and started to reply, but Quirrell cut him off.

"That will be all for tonight. I'm pleased by what I've seen tonight, so keep at it, and I'll see you all next week."

Harry said goodbye to Zacharias, before following Tracey and Millicent out the door. The past month, Quirrell had been insisting upon inter-House partners. As much as people may have complained initially, it was a nice opportunity to prove to the rest of the class he really wasn't a Dark Lord. Bit-by-bit, he really felt like he was changing people's minds.

"Do you want us to wait up for you?" Millicent asked.

Harry shook his head.

"No thanks. I'll see you two later, this shouldn't take very long."

With one final wave, he re-entered the classroom, which was now devoid of students. Quirrell, who was erasing the chalkboard, looked up at his arrival.

"To what do I owe the pleasure, Harry?" Quirrell greeted, wiping his hands on a piece of cloth.

"Well, sir...do you have time for a few questions?" Harry hesitantly asked.

"As I've frequently said, I will always make time for an inquisitive mind. Follow me."

Harry followed Quirrell into the office behind the classroom. Never having been inside it, he was quite surprised by what he found. There was a simple desk, a bookshelf with only a few tomes upon it, but other than that the room was bare. Not a single trace of personality was to be found. For all Harry knew, the office could have looked like this while Dumbledore had been searching for a new Defense Against the Dark Arts professor during the summer.

Quirrell sat at a plain chair behind the desk, motioning for Harry to sit at a stiff, uncomfortable wooden chair across the desk from him.

"Please excuse the state of my office," Quirrell explained. "I have no illusions about the stigma attached to this job, and do not expect to be teaching Defense at Hogwarts for more than a year."

"Do you think there really is a Hogwarts curse?" Harry asked, fully aware of the astronomically bad luck heaped upon instructors of the past.

"I do. Every time an event repeats itself, it decrease coincidence's role. With the amount of times this particular Hogwarts post has been vacated, there is clearly something larger at play here."

Quirrell paused for a moment, as if considering something, but appeared to let it go.

"Regardless, I'm sure you did not ask to see me to discuss my post here at Hogwarts. What do you want to know?"

Harry had been debating coming to Quirrell with his concerns for quite some time, but it took him quite a while to build up the nerve to actually do so. Though Quirrell was a fantastic professor, he certainly wasn't the warm, inviting type.

"Well, I've really enjoyed your class so far," Harry began, his voice full of trepidation, "but there's a few things bothering me."

Quirrell didn't seem at all offended by Harry's statement, which was promising. He instead motioned for Harry to continue. Encouraged, Harry did so.

"Why don't you want Gryffindors here? The most brilliant witch in my year is in Gryffindor, and is really disappointed she can't be here."

To his surprise, Quirrell chuckled lightly.

"Are you keeping Hermione up to date on all the spells you've learned in our extra sessions?"

"Um, yeah, I am," Harry answered, slightly surprised that Quirrell latched onto his motivation so quickly.

"When I was a student here, I was also sorted into Slytherin, so I am fully cognizant of the bad blood between Slytherin and Gryffindor. Of course your group of friends is an exception to the rule, but in general, first-years are too immature to see past their House designation. The learning environment would have been untenable with both factions at one another's throat."

"I guess that's why you chose Slytherin instead of Gryffindor, right sir?"

Quirrell smiled slightly at Harry's request for confirmation.

"Oh, it was certainly a contributing factor."

Harry was silent for a moment, but since Quirrell had voluntarily parted with personal information, maybe he'd be willing to answer something that had been bothering him from the start of the extra class.

"Why did you want to teach an extra class?"

"What made you want to take my extra class?" Quirrell quickly countered.

"Well, I like to learn as much about magic as I can, and I pretty much already know the material in your normal class," Harry replied, prompting a nod from the professor.

"That is the exact dilemma that faces our country, Harry."

"What dilemma, sir?" Harry asked, suspecting that he was being led on.

"The British world is facing a slow erosion of wizarding skills. Talented students who could accomplish much are stuck within simple curriculums, and never given the chance to excel. Magic knows no bounds, but needs stimulation, room to grow. For instance, the Ministry decided that a simple stunner is fifth-year material. Harry, how bored would you be if you had to wait until fifth year to perform a simple stunner?"

Harry shuddered, well-aware of how boring it would be.

"Why limit what we learn, though?"

"The ultimate goal of the Ministry is total control, Harry. Keep wizards from improving themselves, and no one has the talent to challenge the status quo. More than anything, the Ministry cannot abide that which it can't control. Surely you've seen evidence of this yourself?"

Harry thought of all the muggleborn students handicapped by the Ministry's laws, forced to lay their magical talents to rest for three months a year, unable to practice magic. He thought of a corrupt Ministry that would try to paint a ten year-old boy as a Dark Lord simply because they didn't have control of him.

"It all comes back to the Ministry," Harry stated.

Quirrell smiled wide at his answer, the first genuine one he'd seen upon the Defense instructor's face.

"You truly do understand, Harry. The problems that our society faces all stem from the Ministry, and their struggle to keep the wizarding world docile. The students I've invited to this extra class, they all have the chance to bring about real change. Particularly you, Harry."

Harry reddened slightly at the praise, but said nothing.

"I'm sorry if I'm making you uncomfortable, but you are without doubt the most talented first-year student I've ever taught, and I want to help you on the way to greatness."

"Thank you, sir," Harry mumbled, indeed ill at ease with all the praise.

"You can thank me by never becoming complacent, and always striving for something better."

"Professor, you don't have anything to be worried about. I'd get bored quickly if I wasn't always working on new things," Harry replied with a slight smile.

"I'm glad to hear that. However, it is starting to get late, so you should start heading back to your dormitory," Quirrell said, dismissing Harry from his office.

Looking at his watch, Harry saw that it was almost nine-thirty.

"Thank you for your time, sir," Harry said, rising from his seat.

"Anytime, Harry," Quirrell replied, before turning to the stack of papers on his desk.

Feet from the door, Harry felt his vision grow slightly hazy, and steadied himself against the frame to keep from swaying. A slight feeling of déjà-vu washed over him, but it was gone so quickly he wasn't sure if it was real or imagined.

"Are you okay, Harry?" he heard Quirrell ask from behind him.

"Yeah, I'm fine, I just sat up too quickly," Harry admitted, the disorientation fading as he spoke.

"If you say so," Quirrell relented, "just don't pass out on the way back, and make me regret deferring to your judgment."

"I won't, sir," Harry replied, laughing, as he walked out of the office. As was expected, the halls of Hogwarts were completely empty.

Or so he thought, until he turned the corner, coming face-to-face with his second least-favorite prefect.

"You're out past curfew again, Potter!" Percy Weasley declared triumphantly.

Harry, having learned his lesson the last time, reached into his pocket and withdrew the invitation to Quirrell's extra class.

"Yeah, but at least this time I can prove why," Harry remarked, holding up the letter. To his surprise, the malicious grin on Percy's face widened.

"Oh, I'm aware of your little class, Potter. I also happen to know it got out over an hour ago."

Harry scoffed in response to the absurd claim.

"The class ended at nine, Weasley."

Percy shook his head back and forth, an expression of mock sorrow upon his face.

"That's pretty sad, Potter. I know you're only a first-year, but you really should learn to tell time before breaking school rules."

Harry, growing agitated with the smug prefect, pulled out his watch to prove it wasn't much past nine-thirty. Upon seeing the time, he froze.

Ten o' clock.

"What the hell?" Harry whispered to himself, still uncomprehending. It had been nine-thirty when he left Quirrell's office, and he had only been walking for a few minutes. How was this possible?

"That type of language is not tolerated at Hogwarts, Potter," Percy decreed, his voice dripping with self-importance.

Harry ignored the prefect, and began walking back towards the Slytherin dormitories, trying to figure out where the missing half-hour had gone. Percy was temporarily at a loss, not knowing how to react to being ignored, but regained his stride soon enough.

"I'll be speaking to your Head of House about this! I won't let you use that class as an excuse to stay out as late as you want!"

Without turning, Harry addressed the irate prefect.

"I'd wait until tomorrow if I were you. Snape really wouldn't want to be bothered with something like this right now."

With his advice given, Harry turned down the stairs, still at a loss to explain the missing time.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

December 8, 1991

Four days after Harry's missing time incident, no closer to finding an answer, Harry finally confided in his friends during their weekly Saturday "studying" session.

"What was the last time you remember looking at a watch?" Hermione asked after he had relayed the story.

"It was right after me and Quirrell finished our conversation. I checked my watch, then left. Then, poof, a half-hour gone."

"Quirrell and I, Harry," she corrected. "Was there anything unusual that you can remember?"

"Whatever. No," Harry promptly replied, putting his head down on the table. Wait...

Harry's head shot up as he remembered something.

"There was...something. When I started to walk out of Quirrell's office, I got dizzy for a second, and think I might have had a "deja-vu" moment, but it was probably all from just sitting up too fast."

"Is it possible you passed out in the hallway without realizing it?" Millicent asked. "Maybe the dizziness was a warning."

"I guess anything's possible, but every step I took after leaving the classroom I remember clearly."

The group was silent after Harry's statement, with no new perspectives to offer.

"Is there any chance Quirrell did something to you?" Tracey delicately asked.

"I don't think so."

"Haven't you said, from the start of the semester, that there was something off about Quirrell, that you didn't really trust him?" Tracey countered in response to the quick dismissal.

"Tracey," Hermione began in an exasperated tone, "Quirrell is a Hogwarts professor. Why would he hurt a student?"

Tracey scoffed at the Gryffindor's argument.

"You don't think Snape would flog his students if he could get away with it?"

"Snape may not be nice, but he is still a profess-"

"Hermione, how about getting your head out of your arse?" Tracey suggested, cutting her off mid-sentence. Neville, apparently seeing the situation was going critical, stepped in.

"Snape is definitely a different case. Quirrell actually treats his students fair, and he really seems to like Harry."

The two girls were still glaring daggers at one another, but Harry inwardly thanked Neville for stepping in before it could escalate further. He also thought Neville's point was a good one. If Quirrell had wanted to harm him, why give him all the personal information? It wasn't like he was physically hurt; only time seemed to be missing.

No, when Quirrell said he wanted to help, Harry had heard the honesty in his voice. The Defense Against the Dark Arts professor was definitely on his side.

"I'll try to find out what the symptoms mean," Hermione offered, breaking the staring contest with Tracey. Harry had done some research himself, but hadn't found anything conclusive.

"Thanks. I'll ask the Flamels over break; maybe they'll know something about it."

"Speaking of which, Harry, does that mean you're going back to France for the holidays?" Hermione asked, apparently seizing the opportunity for a change of subject.

"Yeah, definitely," Harry answered. "What is everyone else up to?"

"I'm going home too," Hermione offered. "I've really missed my parents, and I want to tell them all about my first year."

"Thanks for completely stealing my thunder," Tracey sarcastically remarked. "Exact same here."

Millicent and Neville were also going home, to no one's great surprise. As great as Hogwarts could be at times, it would take a very compelling reason to keep Harry there during the winter break.

Shortly thereafter they took their leave from the library, Hermione and Neville going up the stairs, everyone else down, towards the Slytherin dormitories. Their trip was relatively silent, until Tracey spoke up on the third-floor landing.

"What makes you so sure Quirrell has nothing to do with your missing memory?"

"Well-"

Harry was cut off abruptly by a large, muffled explosion which echoed through the halls.

"What was that?" Millicent exclaimed in a slightly shaking voice.

"It came from the forbidden corridor," Harry spoke grimly, walking rapidly towards the large double-doors, working up towards a run. Tracey, however, stopped him in his tracks by clamping down on his arm.

"Harry, think! We have no idea what's on the other side of that door!"

Harry impatiently shook her off.

"Someone could be hurt in there right now that needs our help, Tracey!"

Hearing heavy footsteps behind him, Harry turned to see Quirrell sprinting up the stairs, closely followed by Professor Burbage, both teachers with their wands out. The Defense professor still had a large wrapping around his entire left hand, which had been merely been attributed to an 'accident'.

"Harry, guard the door, make sure no other students come through!" Quirrell ordered, to which Harry nodded. As he got into position, Burbage ripped the door open with a complicated wave of her wand. Without looking back, the two professors rushed into the corridor, closing the door behind them.

The three Slytherins did as ordered and stood outside the door, Tracey apart from the others, a deep scowl upon her face. Harry gathered she didn't take too kindly to being shaken off.

"You know, Tracey was right," Millicent said to him after a minute's silence. "It would have made more sense to just get a professor. If we got hurt in there, who would have known we went in?"

With a sigh, Harry realized she was right.

"I'm sorry for acting like your average Gryffindor," Harry apologized.

Tracey's sneer fell away immediately, replaced with a small smile.

"I was going to pout all day about this, but I guess I can't do that anymore," the diminutive girl replied.

Harry let out a small laugh, but his mind was already drifting. He distinctly remembered that Dumbledore had a portrait watching the hallway. Shouldn't it have been able to warn the Headmaster before anything happened? Especially considering that the Stone might even be hidden there.

The door opened again, scattering his thoughts. The two professors appeared, levitating two motionless bodies through the doorway. The bodies appeared to be older, maybe seventh years, a boy and a girl. Judging by their crests, they were both Ravenclaws.

"Are they okay?" Harry asked anxiously.

"They're fine, Mister Potter," Professor Burbage promptly replied. "We just petrified them in case there's internal damage."

"Good job making sure no one else came through," Quirrell said, addressing the three Slytherins. "If anyone else went in, they might have been hurt as well."

Tracey smirked slightly, but had the good grace to not rub it in Harry's face.

"What happened in there, sir?" he asked.

Quirrell shook his head.

"Another time; we've got to get these two over to the infirmary. I'm sure Dumbledore will make a statement at dinner. For now, just go back to your dormitories."

Without a look back, the two adults moved the stiff forms of the students toward the infirmary. They waited until the professors were out of earshot before conversing.

"Didn't Dumbledore say that the third-floor corridor was off-limits because it was being repaired?" Millicent asked.

"Yeah, he did," Tracey began, "but really, what kind of repairs need explosions to work?"

"I don't think any repairs are being done," Harry answered.

"Then what's going on here?" Tracey asked with slightly narrowed eyes, clearly aware that Harry knew more than he was letting on.

Harry shook his head.

"I have ideas, but I'm not saying anything until I find out more."

Tracey looked frustrated at his reply.

"Another thing you have to ask your guardians?"

"Yeah."

"Will you tell after break?" Millicent asked.

Harry thought for a second. Though the Stone was obviously a secret, the explosion might not have been a coincidence. Maybe the two Ravenclaws had tried to steal it? Could there be a plot among some of the student to steal the Stone? While Dumbledore could certainly keep the corridor safe, he wouldn't be able to keep an eye on plotting students, which was definitely something Harry and his friends could do. Besides, it wouldn't hurt to have an extra set of eyes on the lookout.

"Definitely," Harry answered.

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"Can you believe that?" Tracey fumed as she paced about the Common Room. She, along with a great deal of the student populace, had been greatly disappointed by the Headmaster's explanation of the explosion.

Dumbledore had explained to the enthralled students that their two Ravenclaw classmates were fine, that they had merely used a classroom off the forbidden corridor as a rudimentary potions laboratory. The explosion had merely been a failed experiment.

Whispers had broken out following the explanation, almost mutinous in their tone, clearly disappointed by the anti-climactic explanation.

"No," Millicent replied sourly. "It's the dumbest thing I've ever heard."

Even Harry had to admit to himself that the Headmaster's explanation was sorely lacking. There were plenty of private places around the castle that could be used for such a purpose, that didn't include breaking into an off-limits area.

"I don't know," Harry said slowly. "Dumbledore had to say...well, something."

"But why come up with such a terrible explanation?" Tracey demanded, hands on her hips.

Harry put his mind to work, trying to figure it out. Dumbledore was obviously hiding something behind the third-floor corridor. According to the Flamels, the Board of Governors kept a close eye on the Headmaster. If he was hiding the Stone here, he obviously wouldn't have told the Governors. Could Dumbledore have laid traps, one of which was an explosive potion?

With a start, Harry jumped up from the green couch.

"It was a potions explosion," Harry declared to the two girls. "I can't say what it is yet, but I think Dumbledore is hiding something inside the corridor. The two Ravenclaws set off one of his defenses!"

Tracey and Millicent looked rather dubious at his claim.

"So why does Dumbledore blame it on the students?" Millicent asked.

"If he admits to having traps in the school, the Board of Governors would try to kick him out of Hogwarts. He blamed it on the students to save himself," Harry explained.

"I guess it's possible," Millicent conceded.

"Yeah, especially since you know so much more about this than we do," Tracey muttered, not appreciating being left out of the loop.

"But wouldn't the Governors investigate the corridor?" Millicent pointed out.

Harry shook his head.

"Dumbledore said that the floor was completely destroyed in the blast. He might have been telling the truth, so they wouldn't be able to inspect the area."

"They could always use brooms," Millicent pointed out with a slight smile.

Harry laughed slightly at the obvious hole in his logic.

"Yeah, true. Eh, I don't know anymore," Harry admitted, flopping back down onto the couch.

"You know, you could just admit you really don't know what you're talking about," Tracey suggested.

"Never!"

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December 23, 1991

"I'll see you in a few weeks," Harry said to Tracey as they said their farewells for the winter.

"That's if I decide to come back," she replied with a smile, prompting Harry to incline his head.

"So I'll see you in two weeks if you decide to grace Hogwarts with your presence," he amended.

"I like that," she remarked, her light blue eyes sparkling. "I might have to come back now; who else is going to kiss my arse like that?"

"Absolutely no one," Harry deadpanned.

"Probably. Have a good holiday, Harry."

"You too."

With a final wave, Tracey turned back to her parents and disappeared into the crowd. Harry had searched most of Platform Nine-and-Three-Quarters, but had still not seen Perenelle.

At first he had thought the crowds of people had obscured her from sight, but as the minutes passed, dread began to build in the pit of his stomach. Not only could he not find Perenelle, but unless he was imagining things, the crimson-robed Ministry Militia members patrolling the platform seemed to have taken a particularly keen interest in him, marking his every move. As if they were waiting for something to happen, for some sign.

As best as one could carrying a heavy trunk, Harry crouched down, trying to stay out of sight. With a sinking feeling, he recalled Dumbledore's warning about the Ministry. The Headmaster had said that most likely the Ministry would make no attempt to take him in.

Most likely. Thanks Dumbledore.

Trying his best to sneak through the bustle, Harry slowly made his way to the muggle exit from the platform. Out in the muggle world, he might have a better shot at shaking the Ministry Militia.

Hopefully.

A mere twenty feet from the exit, two Militia members entered the platform from the muggle side, their gaze directly upon Harry. With a start, Harry realized they had their wands drawn. Rapidly turning around, he saw that all of the Militia members were leaving their spots, pushing through the crowd and converging upon his position.

"Shit," he whispered to himself, his heart rate beginning to rise. Struggling to maintain his composure, he frantically scanned the thinning crowd, looking for any escape route. Much to his surprise, the Militia had not covered the alley on the west side of the platform. Praying that he could lose them somewhere in the alley, he took off towards it, brandishing his trunk like a battering ram. Wizards and witches alike squawked indignantly as he shunted them aside.

With a final push, he made it through the crowd and into the dark alley. Trash and other objects best left unexamined lined the walls of the narrow alley, but he pressed on. Up ahead on his right was a door, which he sure hoped wasn't locked.

It wasn't.

Throwing the door open, he saw that the interior of the building was pitch black, but there was a latch on the inside of the door. He frantically shut it and threw the latch, letting out a large breath of relief. He may not be completely safe, but it was better than being out in the open platform.

Harry's relief lasted exactly four seconds.

Without warning, a bright light flared in the middle of the room, burning his dilated pupils. With a hiss of pain he shut his eyes tightly.

"Sorry for not warning you, but a voice in the dark probably would have been even more unpleasant," a voice spoke.

Opening his eyes bit-by-bit, he saw that the room was relatively empty, save for a plain wooden table, with chairs set up on each side. Standing at the opposite side of the table, his aloft wand the source of light, was a portly man in a lime-green bowler.

"You're a very hard person to get a hold of, Mister Potter," the man remarked with a grandfatherly smile.

Ignoring the man, Harry's eyes darted around frantically, searching for some sort of escape from the room. Seeing no other doors, he ran back to the one he had come in from, but the handle might as well have been sealed in concrete, as it didn't budge an inch.

"I regret to inform you that the Militia has already locked the door, Harry. I don't like going about things in this fashion, but Dumbledore has left me with no other option," the mysterious man spoke gravely.

Harry found himself getting angrier by the second. They trap him in a room, and this idiot tries to blame Dumbledore? No way.

Then again, this guy did have the Militia under his control, and might be a high-ranking Ministry official. If he pulled out his wand and tried to blast his way out, there might be severe consequences. Maybe he should at least listen to him, for now anyway.

Harry's eyes narrowed with distrust as the man approached him, hand outstretched.

"Forgive me for not introducing myself sooner, but I thought you might have recognized me. My name is Cornelius Fudge."

At the introduction, Harry's mere anger turned to rage. Before him was the man that convinced half the nation he was a Dark Lord. His fingers itching to take his wand and curse the Minister, Harry bore down mentally, banishing the rage with great difficulty. As great as it would feel to curse him, it would not be a smart move. Instead, he settled for ignoring the hand and crossing his arms across his chest in defiance.

"How are you enjoying your time at Hogwarts?" the Minister asked, apparently unbothered by the slight.

Harry snorted at the question.

"It would have been a lot better if people didn't think I was trying to take Voldemort's place."

Fudge frowned slightly at the casual usage of the Dark Lord's name, but had no other reaction.

"I am deeply sorry that your name got dragged through the mud, Harry, but sadly, journalism can sometimes become irresponsible, especially when there are so many conflicting accounts of the truth."

Harry gave Fudge an incredulous look. Was this idiot really trying to claim he was innocent of tarnishing his name?

"Did you think of trying to ask Dumbledore?" he asked heatedly.

Fudge shook his head slightly.

"I tried to find out the truth from Dumbledore, but he chose to never reveal anything, despite my many queries. With no eyewitness accounts, the Department of Magical Law Enforcement had to base their assumptions upon what little evidence there was. The Prophet, sadly, was most interested in selling papers, and chose to label you as a Dark Arts practitioner."

"Come on, everyone knows the Prophet only writes what the Ministry tells it to."

Fudge shook his head in negation, having the audacity to look scandalized.

"Despite all that you've been led to believe, Harry, England is not a fascist nation."

His mind racing, Harry chose not to reply. While he certainly didn't believe anything the Minister had told him, he recalled that even from day one, Nicolas had voiced his mistrust of the British Ministry. Was he not being told everything?

Apparently sensing his unease, Fudge pressed on.

"I'm sorry to say it, Harry, but we believe that you may be an unwitting pawn in a conspiracy by the French government."

Of all the things he was expecting, that was certainly not one of them. Before he could stop himself, he let out a snicker.

"That doesn't make any sense. Maybe Dumbledore made a mistake, but the Flamels do care about me."

"I don't doubt that the care they have given you is genuine," Fudge countered, "but I ask you this: Why would Dumbledore choose to take you to a foreign country, when there were a host of fine families here that would be proud to take care of such an iconic wizarding figure?"

"Um, probably because Dumbledore was afraid of what you'd do to me," Harry pointed out.

Fudge took off his bowler at Harry's statement, and ran a hand through his rumpled gray hair.

"Harry, that doesn't make any sense. Your arrival into the wizarding world would have been a joyous event. How would we ever be able to get away with mistreating you?"

Harry thought back, recalling that Dumbledore had been afraid the Ministry would have made him into a mascot, but what exactly did that mean?

"I don't know," Harry crossly answered. "Besides, why would Dumbledore betray his own country like that?"

The Minister sighed heavily.

"While Dumbledore is unquestionably the most powerful and talented wizard in England, he's having trouble adapting to modern times. During my time as Minister, I've attempted to bring wizarding society into the new century, but Dumbledore doesn't want things to change. He's conspiring with the French government to have me overthrown."

Harry immediately began to object, but Fudge leaned forward, cutting him off.

"If you're a French citizen, why would their Ministry allow you to attend an English school? They want to keep you happy, so that you won't stop to question their motives. Isn't it curious how quickly the guardianship papers went through?"

Harry certainly didn't think it that strange, since the Flamels probably had set it up before hand, but said nothing. He was having a hard enough time trying to keep up with the Minister's wild accusations.

"Anyway," Fudge continued, "I want you to know that the entire country supports you, Harry. We can protect you from Dumbledore, the man that kidnapped you and sent you away from your parents' birthplace."

Harry started to object, but Fudge once again silenced him, with a wave of his hand.

"Protection from Dumbledore is not all that we can offer you. Ever since Severus Snape took the position of Potions Master at Hogwarts, there have been almost constant complaints about his teaching practices. If you were lodge a formal complaint as a British citizen, the Hogwarts Board of Governors would need to act to protect the students' interest, and would have no choice but to fire Severus."

The offer immediately got Harry's attention. Not that he planned on leaving the Flamel's, but he almost began to get excited over the prospect of Snape being sacked.

"I don't need a decision now, but think about it over the upcoming year."

Without waiting for an answer, Fudge pointed his wand at the door, throwing it open.

"Perenelle is waiting for you at the end of the alley," Fudge explained, before apparating away with a loud crack.

Shocked at Fudge's abrupt departure, he stood there for a minute before coming to his senses. He grabbed his trunk and dragged it back to the mouth of the alley, towards a waiting Perenelle. Upon seeing him, she rushed towards him, engulfing him in a tight hug.

"Those awful Militia goons didn't hurt you, did they?" she asked, her face angry.

"No, they just wanted to ask questions," Harry assured, his face pressed into her warm robes.

Perenelle's tense form began to relax at his statement. He felt her nod above him, clearly relieved.

"Aurors were waiting at the apparation point, and demanded to see my traveling papers. I am so sorry, Harry, it took me too long to realize they were just stalling."

Lightly, she broke the embrace and put her hands on his shoulders.

"As much fun as the platform has been today, I suppose that going home is probably your main priority right now," she remarked, staring down into his eyes.

Harry gave her a grateful smile, having certainly had his fill of England for the day.

"That's the only thing I want right now."

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Author Notes:

Right on schedule with this one. Work is starting to get busier, with much overtime to be had, so I wouldn't expect the next chapter for another two weeks. Next up is Harry's holidays at the Flamels.

Any comments, suggestions or criticisms would be deeply appreciated, and inspire me to write as opposed to playing video games. I'll make an effort to answer every review I get.

Thanks to my co-conspirators, mira mirth and darklordmike, for their valuable assistance with plotting, characterization, continuity and grammar. Their combined efforts save me a ridiculous amount of time with the editing process, and are deeply appreciated. Also, thanks to Japanese Jew for the suggestions.

DLP Thanks:

The Lord of Chaos, psihary, Demons in the Night,

Twelfth Movement: The First Snow

December 23, 1991

With a loud crack, Harry appeared in a rustic living room, clutching Perenelle's arm tightly. As opposed to the Flamel home, where almost everything seemed to be constructed from white stone, here everything was made of a dark wood. Thick, sturdy-looking beams crisscrossed high above him, leaving an impression of vast age.

If he had to guess, he'd say they were at the vacation home of the Flamels. Not that it mattered to him. They could have been in the middle of the Sahara and he would be happy. He was just relieved to be away from the pressures of Hogwarts.

Despite Perenelle having side-along apparated him a few times now, he still found the travel method very unpleasant, and shook his head a few times. It seemed to help the trauma of being squeezed in and out of existence.

At their arrival, Nicolas looked up from his book, and began to get out of the large stuffed chair he had been reclining in.

"Welcome to our vacation home," Nicolas said with arms spread wide, an infectious grin upon his face. He strode over to Harry and shook his hand enthusiastically.

"You really must be glad to see me," Harry remarked with mock awe in his voice, "since you actually got up."

Despite the casual tone of his voice, he was inwardly thrilled to see his guardians again. They had been one of the few constants in this most recent phase of life, and seeing them again did his mind good. He even held out hope that maybe being here would stop the nightmares.

Nicolas started to reply, but stopped upon seeing his wife's expression, and immediately went to her.

"What is the matter, dear?"

"Those Ministry bastards held Harry captive at King's Cross!" Perenelle spat venomously.

All traces of good cheer vanished from Nicolas' face at her statement. He immediately knelt down, so that he was eye-level with Harry.

"Did they hurt you at all?" the alchemist asked softly, his face concerned. Harry could tell his guardian was deeply angered, but appreciated the clear effort he was taking to stay calm.

He shook his head in response, and recounted the day's events. Through his story, Nicolas' mouth thinned, and his eyes hardened, becoming twin chips of ice.

"Well, I am glad to see that you were unharmed," Nicolas remarked at the end, attempting to smile, but all that came out was a grimace.

"What was Dumbledore thinking?" Perenelle asked aloud, to which her husband shook his head.

"I cannot fathom what he was thinking, but he certainly has some explaining to do."

"Why aren't you more angry at Fudge?" Harry asked. While he thought Dumbledore should have prevented the Ministry from cornering him, the Headmaster had warned him something like this might happen.

"Because Dumbledore assured us that his contact within the Ministry told him that there were no planned actions against you," Nicolas explained, which Harry supposed made sense. "While it is true I am reclusive in nature, had I known the Ministry would rear its ugly head, I would have made it my priority to be there."

Harry, noting the book he had been reading, rolled his eyes.

"Yeah, I can tell you had a lot going on," he said sarcastically. Maybe it was a bit mean, but he didn't think Dumbledore was completely to blame.

The cold look faded from Nicolas' eyes, to be replaced by weariness.

"You are completely right Harry. I apologize for not being there."

"Thanks," Harry replied graciously. "Dumbledore wasn't the only person who made a mistake."

"True. Still, he may not be aware that the Ministry is interrogating students at King's Cross. Perenelle, what do you think of having Dumbledore over Christmas evening?"

"That would be fine," she agreed, "just as long as you remain civil."

"Well, as civil as I normally am," Nicolas reasoned, prompting a sigh from his wife.

"Not really comforting, is it," Harry remarked, turning to Perenelle.

"Did I mention how great it is to have you back?" she asked, smiling down at him. Harry felt reassured by the smile, as it was a sign that the Flamels were not going to let the events at King's Cross bring down the evening.

"Fantastic, once again I must wage a war on both fronts," Nicolas dryly said. "I was about to go make a sandwich. Any interested parties, providing they are willing to keep any scathing comments to themselves, are welcome."

He took a bow before walking towards the kitchen. Laughing, Harry followed him in, where the alchemist pulled a loaf of bread from the ice-box.

"Do you want one as well?" Nicolas asked as he began to make a sandwich.

Harry nodded in response, but was surprised that Nicolas was actually making food for himself.

"Did you forget to pack the house-elf?"

"Every once in a while, it is a good idea to go for a few weeks without assistance," Nicolas explained, shaking his head. "When Perenelle and I depart for our annual Christmas retreat, we always do everything ourselves. It allows for one to appreciate how much work they truly do, and to not take their labor for nothing."

Harry found himself enamored with the idea. If a house-elf always catered to your every whim, what would happen if you had to do things on your own?

"I really like that idea," he admitted, eliciting a small smile from Perenelle.

"That is not exactly surprising, Harry. Do you remember how long it took for you to allow Limey to do anything for you?"

Perenelle's casual usage of the departed house-elf's name was a good sign that Limey's death was no longer an emotional sore spot. Harry did remember that it took several months before he would even let the elf into his room, not trusting the strange creature.

"Yeah, I do. By the way, where are we right now?"

"Southeast France, in the Chamonix valley," Perenelle answered. "This is normally our vacation home, but with the manor still undergoing massive warding upgrades, we have been spending quite a bit of time here."

"When do you think they'll be done?" Harry asked, hoping it was soon, so the Stone could be moved away from Hogwarts.

"The contractors 'say' March," Nicolas contemptuously spat from across the kitchen. "So that probably means next March."

"Um, what kind of juice did you bring here?" Harry asked, changing the subject as quick as possible. It certainly seemed that the contractors' time frame was a sore subject.

The sour look departed from Nicolas' face at his distraction, to be replaced by a sly grin.

"Not to worry; we brought plenty of pumpkin juice."

At the statement, Harry slumped against the table.

"Why do wizards think that anything made from pumpkins could be good?" he complained, his head supported by the table surface.

"Have you ever eaten pumpkin pie?" Perenelle asked with a slight smile.

"But...that's not real pumpkin," Harry whined, causing both Flamels to snicker in victory.

"Do not worry, we brought some of that dreadful orange juice that muggles seem to like," Perenelle reassured, taking pity upon him.

Harry exhaled in an exaggerated fashion and wiped an arm across his brow.

"My wife has this strange notion that we should cater to your eccentric whims," Nicolas mused, "though I have not the faintest idea why."

"Why are you calling anyone eccentric?" Harry asked with a snort of laughter.

"Touche," Nicolas replied, placing a roast beef sandwich before him.

"Thanks. You'd make a great house-elf if all you had to do was make sandwiches."

"I sincerely doubt that," Nicolas replied, seating himself at the table to eat his snack.

He had to admit, it was pretty good. Then again, it was hard to screw up sandwiches. Wait, what did they do all day? Nicolas didn't have his potions laboratory, and Perenelle didn't have her green house.

"How do you keep yourselves busy?" Harry asked, genuinely curious.

"Well, we still have plenty to do. The ward upgrades on our home were designed by both Perenelle and myself, so we have spent a lot of time going over all of the professional warders' work, to confirm that they construct everything according to our plans and do not cut any corners."

"Why not just do it yourselves?"

Nicolas shook his head.

"While my knowledge of warding is vast, physically, it is a very difficult discipline. We have an entire team of warders at the estate. If we were to do it all ourselves, which would include importing the large foundation stones, chargers, dischargers, the almost endless carving and the actual ward-casting itself, the upgrade would take years."

"So, not really an easy job," Harry observed.

"Not at all," Perenelle agreed. "If you were a bit older, taking both Ancient Runes and Arithmancy, it would have been very beneficial to your education to see the large-scale ward construction."

Harry was intrigued by the idea.

"Where would I begin if I wanted to learn about warding? I mean, I could use something new to learn, since my first-year work is pretty easy."

"Well..." Perenelle began slowly, a small smile upon her face, "you could begin to learn French."

Harry grimaced slightly at the thought. Really, French?

Apparently sensing his lack of enthusiasm, the Flamels began to laugh.

"Oh Harry," Perenelle said fondly, "the study of warding is primarily built upon runic carvings, which is begun by learning basic words in many different languages."

Harry was daunted by the thought.

"Look on the bright side," Nicolas implored. "Next time you see Miss Delacour, you will completely understand the insults thrown your way."

"Wonderful," Harry dryly stated, hoping that day was still far away. Then again, she was really nice to look at...

"Anyway, Harry," Perenelle spoke, tearing him from his thoughts, "aside from working on our own ward designs, we have been helping out Dumbledore with a project of his."

"Did you help out with the Stone's protection at Hogwarts?" Harry asked.

Perenelle nodded, but seemed reluctant to elaborate further on the subject.

"Can you tell me more about it? If two students were caught there, maybe a whole group of students are after the Stone? I want to help."

Perenelle, clearly conflicted, bit her lip, before turning to her husband for help.

"The students involved were not trying to steal the Stone," Nicolas stated, stepping in.

"Then why did Dumbledore come up with such a terrible explanation for the explosion? It made him look like a liar in front of everyone."

Nicolas sighed deeply.

"Albus was put in a difficult situation, where he had no good options."

"We usually see Dumbledore during the winter holidays," Perenelle mentioned. "Once he hears about your ordeal with the Minister, he will want to know what exactly happened. It is entirely up to his discretion, but if you agree to keep it quiet, he may explain himself to you."

"Thanks a lot for trusting me with this," Harry said sincerely.

Nicolas shrugged in response.

"If we really trusted you, we would not have warded the liquor cabinet."

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Harry awoke slowly on Christmas morning, feeling more refreshed than he had all semester. Freedom from the more trying aspects of Hogwarts had been a blessing. While it had only been two days, it already felt like the fall semester had finished years ago.

Upon getting up, he saw a menagerie of brightly colored gifts stacked at the foot of his bed, far many more than he would have ever anticipated. He was suddenly glad that he had erred on the side of caution and mail-ordered gifts for his friends.

Amidst the bright gift-wrapping, a thick, brown package caught his attention. Rough lettering announced that it was indeed his, courtesy of Hagrid. While the giant gamekeeper was slightly leery of his placement within Slytherin, he had tried to look past it, and invited Harry down for tea a few times during the semester.

Opening the package revealed a rough, wooden flute, which sounded roughly like an owl when blown. Harry vaguely wondered if it could be used to summon owls, before reminding himself to write a note of thanks to Hagrid.

All of his friends at school had given him books on various topics, well aware of how he devoured reading material due to his sleeping habits. Apparently having heard of the unpleasantness of his last Quidditch game, the Flamels had given him a dark green cloak, that supposedly was impervious to rainfall. Oddly enough, even the Weasley twins had given him a gift. It was simply a note instructing him to tap the three darker bricks at the bottom of the eastern wall of the broom shed, before urging him to continue his fine work of annoying Percy and Ron. With a grin, he realized that the twins had provided him with another secret passage, which he wouldn't wait to explore.

Marveling at how thoughtful his small group of friends had been, Harry ventured downstairs, from where the smell of frying bacon was wafting from.

"Merry Christmas!" Harry exclaimed upon entering the kitchen.

"And Merry Christmas to you, Harry," Perenelle greeted from her seated position at the table, a steaming mug of coffee between her hands. "Thank you so much for the bracelet, I love it."

Sure enough, his guardian was wearing the silver bracelet around her left wrist. He had been nervous about buying her anything, but seemed to appreciate the thought.

"The book was great," Nicolas said jovially, not looking up from the stove. "Who knew that monkshood and wolfsbane were the same thing?"

Harry laughed in response. Apparently his other guardian had liked his book, 'An Idiot's Guide to Brewing'.

"Thanks a lot for the cloak; I'll probably need it against Hufflepuff in February."

"You are very welcome. I am glad you liked it," Perenelle replied with a fond smile.

"I wanted to give you a pair of old socks from my drawer, but I was overruled," Nicolas remarked, sending a mock glare at his wife.

"Please ignore the cranky old house elf," Perenelle stated, complete ignoring her husband.

"You two should tread carefully, lest I accidentally spill a bowel-loosening potion in your breakfasts."

"You must have already put one in your own," Perenelle stated, "How else to explain the bull excrement pouring forth from your mouth?"

Nicolas looked surprised by his wife's vulgarity for a moment, before doubling over in laughter, a state Harry and Perenelle were already in. It took a while for the giggles to fade away, but once they did, Nicolas began to serve them breakfast. Harry found himself impressed by the alchemist's cooking skills.

"This is really good," Harry remarked. "I'm surprised, I thought most wizards had house elves cook for them."

"Most do," Nicolas remarked with a slight frown, "but my parents found sloth abhorrent, so assigned a set of chores to all of their children. For several years, my responsibility was breakfast."

"I really like that idea," Harry remarked. "Some of the kids at Hogwarts definitely could have used that."

"It is a difficult balance to maintain," Perenelle interjected, "since almost all basic needs, at least in normal wizarding families, can be provided by a house elf. Parents often are unable to instill a sense of responsibility within children, as house-elves attend to their every need."

"So basically all children become spoiled and lazy," Nicolas finished, eliciting a dramatic sigh from his wife.

"Yes, I suppose that is true, dear, I just stated my point with much greater eloquence."

"Eloquence has always seemed to elude me," Nicolas admitted with a grin.

"Along with social skills, manners and empathy," Perenelle added with a chuckle.

"No argument here."

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Following breakfast, Harry rose at once to clear the table, but Perenelle gripped his wrist lightly. He looked down in question, to see her give a single shake of her head, before looking at her husband.

"Please sit down, Harry," Nicolas implored kindly. He did as asked, wondering what was going on.

"From what I have read about the muggle world," Nicolas began, "it is vastly different from the wizarding world with respect Christmas tradition."

"I've noticed," Harry said, "there's no awkward present opening in front of a group of people."

Nicolas chuckled at his observation.

"Indeed. Presents have become universal throughout the wizarding world for the past few generations, but in general, Christmas tradition in the wizarding world differs from family to family."

"So each family celebrates it differently?" Harry asked, intrigued by the idea.

"Exactly. Every wizarding family in Europe, despite whatever their revisionist history may claim, started from a single clan, from which began unique traditions," Nicolas explained. He took a slightly nervous breath before continuing, "Today, although we certainly do not wish to force you, you are more than welcome to participate in our Christmas tradition, since you are now a part of our family."

"I'd love to," Harry quickly replied. This was the first time he had ever seen Nicolas unsure of himself, and he wanted to reassure his guardian.

"Spectacular," Nicolas said, clearly pleased by the answer. A spring in his step, he strode over to a closet and pulled out a bulky, fur-lined robe. Harry raised a single eyebrow at it, wondering if they were going to the Antarctic.

"Where we are going, you will be quite grateful for the extra protection," Nicolas assured.

Fifteen minutes later, wrapped so tightly in the huge robe that he felt cocooned, the trio set out from the house. To the east of the house, a huge mountain range stretched up to the heavens, terminating in snow-covered peaks. To the west, about a mile away, was a large grove of snow covered trees. Stepping out of the doorway, he was surprised to see that his boots barely left an imprint upon the thick layer of snow covering the ground.

"Magic?" Harry asked, glancing at Perenelle.

"Indeed, magic," she replied with a chuckle, her voice muffled slightly by the light blue scarf wrapped around her mouth. "We put feather-light charms on your boots last night, as well as a weight dispersion charm to prevent you from falling through."

"Our journey would be far less comfortable if we had to wade through snow up to our waists," Nicolas remarked.

"Yeah, definitely," Harry agreed, grateful for the spellwork. "Where are we going?"

At his question, Nicolas stretched out an arm, and pointed to the dense forest ahead of them.

"That is our destination."

It had been difficult to discern the true size of the trees through the gray haze of the lightly falling snow, but as they got closer, he saw that the trees were larger than any he had ever seen, by a comfortable margin.

"Those trees are huge!" Harry exclaimed, trying to make himself heard over a sudden gust of wind.

"Some of them are over a thousand years old," Perenelle explained.

"Magic?"

"Indeed, once again, magic," she replied.

"As I mentioned before, every Pureblooded family has had their own Christmas tradition passed down through the generations," Nicolas explained. "The Flamel family has always withstood the trials thrown at it, from the Templars, to the horrors of the Vatican magical genocides, to the Black Plague. Through it all, the Flamels have always served the Light, no matter how dim it may have seemed at times in comparison to the overwhelming darkness."

As he finished, they arrived to the edge of the large grove. Harry had to practically look straight up to see the treetops, rising to a height he couldn't begin to estimate.

"This is the Flamel Grove," Perenelle said, continuing her husband's explanation. "It started from a single tree over fifteen hundred years ago, planted by a defiant young couple who had left their clan, wishing to carve out a different destiny for themselves."

"My ancestor, Jacques, tired of the conflicts that beset his clan, practitioners of the Dark Arts, wished to turn over a new leaf," Nicolas resumed. "Together with his young wife, Cerise, in the dead

of winter, they planted a single oak tree, a symbol that even in the harshest, most desolate of times, new life can flourish. Against all odds, when the young couple returned a year later, after immense hardship, the tree had not only survived, but was flourishing."

Now at the center of the grove, Nicolas lightly placed his hands upon the thickest tree in the forest. He had no way of measuring, but Harry would have sworn the trunk was twenty feet wide.

"This is the very tree my ancestors planted," Nicolas said reverently, emotion heavy in his voice. "The Light has deemed to keep it strong, and shall continue to do so as long as the Flamels serve the Light."

"Ever since that faithful winter, on every Christmas, the Flamels have gathered her to plant a single tree, a ceremony which grants life when all else is dead."

Motioning Harry onwards, they began to walk towards the opposite side of the forest, towards the opposite edge. He noticed that the trees started to slightly decrease in height the further from the center they traveled. Upon reaching the opposite edge of the grove, Nicolas took a small object from his robe and enlarged it with a wave of his wand, before pressing it into Harry's hands.

With a widening of his eyes, Harry realized that it was a fledgling oak tree, four feet long.

Perenelle withdrew her own wand, and vanished the snow before them, revealing the soft brown of the ground. With an upward stroke, she levitated a large portion of dirt out, leaving a hollow three feet in depth. That done, she turned to Harry.

"Traditionally, the youngest family member actually plants the tree," Perenelle explained. "As the newest, youngest member of our family, we would be honored if you would plant it."

Emotion swept through him at her words, dwarfed by the magnitude of what the Flamels were inviting him to do. Unable to articulate his gratitude, he nodded quickly, placing the young oak tree in the hole, and holding it upright. Perenelle nodded happily at his work, before levitating the dark earth back into the hole, her eyes slightly moist as she worked.

Once the tree was properly supported, Nicolas took four flat stones from his pocket, and placed them equidistant around the tree. He tapped each one once, a thin tendril of magic snaking from the tip of his wand into each. Once completed, a translucent green shield popped into view, before fading into transparency.

Perenelle started to speak, but was unable, looking to her husband for help. He took one of her hands in his own, squeezing lightly and giving her a reassuring smile, before turning to Harry.

"While the winter is harsh, with a single ward to fend off the worst of the cold, the tree's roots will grow deeply during the winter, so that in spring the ward may wane, leaving the tree to thrive on its own."

Harry nodded again, unable to come up with a response. While surely planting a tree is a small thing, it felt like the largest, most important thing he'd ever done. It felt like being part of something larger, older and wiser than himself. It was humbling in a sense, but it also made him feel like he belonged here. For a short moment, he felt terrible for actually considering the merits of Fudge's offer.

"Thank you for letting me be a part of this," Harry said, unable to come up with anything better.

Perenelle had nothing to say, but seemed fine with his response, as she pulled him into a tight embrace. Well, as tight as could be with several feet of bulky robes between them.

Nicolas smiled at his statement, his eyes dancing merrily.

"There is no one I would be prouder to have partaken in our Christmas tradition, Harry."

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

The winter elements unleashed their true potential as the trio made their way back to the house, the harsh wind cutting through the thick layers. Even warming charms provided little comfort against the frigid cold, making for a very uncomfortable trek back.

"Has anyone ever froze to death on the way back?" Harry shouted, struggling to make his voice heard over the roar of the wind.

"Not lately," Nicolas yelled back.

On that comforting note, they continued their grim march. Just when Harry thought that he couldn't take anymore, he found himself at the front door. The trio let out nearly identical sighs of relief as they entered the indoor sanctuary. Nicolas quickly conjured flames within the fireplace, and in short order, feeling began to return to Harry's extremities.

They hastened to position themselves around the roaring fire, relishing the warmth washing across their skin. After a few minutes, Perenelle turned to Harry.

"We forgot to tell you earlier, but Dumbledore is going to be here soon. Would you mind recounting the events of King's Cross again, for him?"

Harry shook his head.

"No, that's okay. Besides, I have to ask him a few things."

Perenelle leaned forward at his statement.

"Harry, you must know," she began, her voice earnest, "that while Dumbledore did make a mistake, despite what Fudge said, he does have your best interests at heart."

"Oh, I know that," he reassured, getting up from the chair. "There's just a few things that don't make sense."

Perenelle nodded with understanding as he left the living room behind, and went upstairs to change out of his thick robes. He quickly threw on a pair of jeans and shirt, deep in thought.

There was obviously a lot going on between the Headmaster and the Minister, if Fudge went so far out of his way to convince him that Dumbledore didn't have his best interests at heart. More than anything, it seemed like the ultimate goal was to extract him from Dumbledore's influence. What was the history between the two of them?

After he was finished changing, he heard the roar of the fireplace from downstairs, signaling the arrival of the Headmaster. Hoping to

get some answers, he went back down the stairs. At the bottom, he took one look at the living room and burst out laughing.

Albus Dumbledore was certainly in the holiday spirit, if his attire was any indication. His robes were a bright green, complete with animated dancing red elves.

"Merry Christmas, Harry," Dumbledore greeted with a knowing smile.

"Merry Christmas, sir," Harry returned with a wide grin. How he was supposed to concentrate on his questions with Dumbledore's robes assaulting his eyes?

"Please, take a seat," Dumbledore implored, motioning to the chair beside him. Harry indulged him.

"Forgive me for dispensing with the pleasantries, as I am tragically short on time, but before I say anything else, please allow me to apologize for preventing the Ministry from accosting you."

"Um, it's okay, sir. They didn't hurt me or anything."

"I am certainly relieved to hear that," Dumbledore said. "As for what happened at King's Cross, could you please indulge me and provide the details of that day?"

Harry complied, and relayed the details of his meeting with the Minister. Dumbledore nodded at various points throughout the story, but kept all commentary to himself.

"Thank you for recounting that unpleasantness," Dumbledore said once he had finished his story.

"Why does Fudge hate you so much?" Harry asked, eager for answers.

"Why do you think that he hates me?" Dumbledore countered, his expression serious.

"Um, well, it seemed like the Minister wanted me to think you were dangerous, and I needed protection. Why would he say that if he didn't hate you? I mean, you don't seem that dangerous to me."

"Well, I should hope not," Dumbledore replied with a light smile, which faded into a sigh. "Cornelius Fudge does not hate me, but he does fear me, as I am considered a threat to his power base."

"Really?" Harry said, incredulously. If Dumbledore wanted to be the Minister, why was he the Hogwarts' Headmaster, which wasn't a Ministry job at all?

"Sadly, yes. During Voldemort's rise to power, when Fudge first became Minister, he leaned heavily upon my advice, with almost daily correspondence by owl. I was more than happy to help, as Fudge appeared to be committed to doing the right thing. Following the events of Halloween, 1981, Cornelius and I were at odds. Desperate for some good news to give his constituents, the Minister wished to release a press statement claiming that Voldemort had been destroyed. I advised him against this course of action, explaining that the situation was very delicate, and that time was needed before any concrete information could be derived from the events of that night. Fudge, for the last time, took my advice."

"What happened?" Harry asked.

"To say the wizarding world took it poorly would be a massive understatement. Hoping for stability, instead the public received uncertainty. Societal morale, already low from the war, plummeted further, followed by public demonstrations calling for Fudge's resignation. To this day, I firmly believe that Cornelius could have weathered the storm, but he caved in to people's insecurities. Unable to say that Voldemort was truly gone, he took another route to allaying the public's fear. He pushed several new initiatives through the Wizengamot, most notably the creation of the first Ministry Militia, and the expansion of Ministry power."

"So that's why the Ministry has such power over Hogwarts?"

"Among other reasons. Though a gloom still hung over the wizarding world, he was praised by the public for making the wizarding world 'safer'. Emboldened by his victory of public perception, he scorned my efforts to stop Ministry expansion, as he claimed my prior advice had nearly killed his political career."

"Well, it looks like it worked out for him," Harry reasoned. "Why does he still have a problem with you?"

"Cornelius, in exchange for early support in pushing his initiatives through the Wizengamot, pledged allegiance to a few of the Britain's prominent blood-supremacist families. They pushed him to further their own agendas, which included the creation of the Muggle Relations department, complete magical surveillance over the British Isles and expanded powers for the Hogwarts' Board of Governors. I fought all of these motions, even going public with my arguments, which widened the rift between us."

"Wouldn't magical surveillance hurt the purebloods?"

"No," Dumbledore answered gravely, "because all of their homes are cloaked from Ministry observation. It was merely a way to monitor magical usage by the muggleborn and half-blood populations. Regardless, it is a constant source of frustration to the Minister that I command more respect than he does. He has attempted to discredit me through the wizarding media for almost six years now."

"Okay, I guess that all makes sense," Harry remarked. "But why would Fudge want me to believe you're dangerous?"

"The Minister's rage upon finding out you became a French citizen was vast. From what my contacts within the Ministry could tell, Fudge had hoped that I would turn you over to the Ministry, in hopes of clearing your name of further scrutiny and public scorn. He never imagined that I would turn to the French Ministry."

"Minister Fudge clearly underestimated you," Nicolas remarked with a wry grin.

"Indeed he did. From what I can tell, the Minister had hoped to use you, Harry, as a symbol that Britain had indeed put the horrors of yesterday behind, and that the Ministry had helped to usher in this new, peaceful world."

"Um, what exactly does that mean, sir?"

"By my estimate, you would have been paraded around to endless political fundraisers and rallies. Even worse, you would have been placed with a 'prestigious' pureblooded family, one with close ties to

the Ministry. In all probability, that family would have been the Malfoys."

Once again, the fucking Malfoys. Why did everything always come back to them?

From behind, he felt the gentle pressure of Perenelle squeezing his shoulder in support. He gave her a grateful smile, before turning back to Dumbledore.

"He really would have stuck me with those Death-Eaters?"

"Yes," the Headmaster answered confidently. "The Malfoys crave wealth and power, both of which could be increased by adopting you, the sole heir to one of the most prestigious wizarding families in Britain."

With a start, he realized what Dumbledore was implying: If he had died under the stewardship of the Malfoys, the Potter fortune would have become theirs. He allowed himself a moment of rage, before bearing down mentally, shunting aside his anger. He could be angry later; he had to gather answers now.

"Okay, but why did the Daily Prophet continue to write bad stuff about me? Didn't Fudge think I might never come back to Britain if the wizarding world thought I was a traitor?"

"The Minister thought that once you became an official citizen of France, you would attend Beauxbatons. He moved quickly to make you into a pariah, seizing the opportunity to further discredit me. However, since you attended Hogwarts after all, Cornelius was left in a very awkward position. All throughout the semester, he was adamant about meeting you, but I was able to prevent it. I did not think he would stoop to forcing a meeting with you, but sadly, I was mistaken."

"So, if Fudge wants to make me mistrust you, why didn't he come up with a better story?"

All three of the adults laughed at his statement.

"Forgive us, Harry," Dumbledore said, still chuckling. "Cornelius certainly underestimated you. He assumed you were a gullible child,

who would believe his story without questioning it further. I think it is safe to say his assumption was fatally flawed."

Harry laughed.

"Yeah, I guess so. Still, his offer to have Snape sacked was a nice thought."

Dumbledore frowned at the statement.

"Professor Snape, Harry," he corrected. "Severus is a very valuable part of my teaching staff, and I do not take threats against his employment lightly."

Harry let out a loud huff, not buying into why the Headmaster continued to defend his Potions Master.

"What, you don't think you could find someone else to terrify students and treat them unfairly?" he mocked.

"Severus's methods may be unorthodox, but beneath his caustic exterior he is the most accomplished Potions Master in Britain," Dumbledore responded calmly.

"That doesn't matter if he can't teach it!" Harry exclaimed. "He takes points for asking questions, calls people stupid for making mistakes, and ignores the Slytherins when they start fights with the Gryffindors! I swear, I almost want to hug Neville after every class, since he looks like he wants to cry!"

"When you say Neville, do you mean Neville Longbottom?" Perenelle asked, breaking in.

"Um, yeah," Harry answered, surprised she knew the name.

"Albus Dumbledore!" Perenelle scorned, turning her angry gaze upon him. "After all that boy has been through, you allow him to be bullied by that greasy Death-Eater!"

"Wait, he's a Death-Eater!" Harry exclaimed.

"It appears the cat is out of the bag," Nicolas observed with barely restrained glee.

Dumbledore took off his glasses, and pinched the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger.

"Severus was indeed a Death-Eater at one time," Dumbledore admitted, his eyes still closed, "but he left the Dark Lord's service shortly before his fall. I have the utmost confidence in Severus, but I will concede that perhaps he is being too harsh on the younger students, and will speak to him about it."

Harry didn't know if he trusted Dumbledore to actually do anything about his Potions Master, especially considering he was a fucking Death-Eater. He considered throwing out Beauxbatons as an option, but decided to leave it alone, as he was intrigued by what Perenelle had said.

"What has Neville been through?" Harry asked. Although Neville didn't talk much about his parents, considering he always spoke of his grandmother raising him, he assumed that meant something horrible had happened to them.

Dumbledore shook his head sadly.

"If Mister Longbottom has not yet told you, I shall not betray his secrets. Suffice it to say, he has had a difficult upbringing."

Harry assumed as much, but conceded Dumbledore was right, and that maybe it was best for Neville to talk about it when he was ready.

"You had better make sure that Snape eases up on young Neville," Perenelle reiterated, her gaze hard, "because if you do not, I will have no choice but to travel to Hogwarts myself and straighten out that filthy Death-Eater."

"As I have already stated, I will speak to him about it," Dumbledore replied sharply, taking exception to the repeated use of the term 'Death-Eater'.

Harry considered mentioning it again, since it was technically true, but figured it might not be the best of ideas to antagonize Dumbledore. Besides, he was still curious about the terrible

explanation behind the explosion behind the locked door. And there was that strange missing time...

"In early December, right before that strange explosion, something strange happened." Harry went on to explain the circumstances surrounding his missing time event following

Quirrell's extra class.

Dumbledore went pale when Harry mentioned the disorientation upon getting up. Before he could ask the Headmaster what was wrong, he jumped up.

"Harry, what you just described are classic symptoms of being memory charmed. The explosion occurred because the students tried to disable the protections around the room containing the Stone. I thought they might have been under the Imperius, but there were no traces of Dark magic upon them."

"Wait, Quirrell is trying to steal the Stone?" Harry asked, confused.

"Perhaps," Dumbledore conceded. "The entire Hogwarts staff knew I was leaving for a few hours today. If he were going to steal it, it would be now. Forgive me, but I must return to Hogwarts. I will return when I know more."

Dumbledore rushed to the fireplace, throwing in a handful of Floo powder.

"The Headmaster's Office!" he yelled, disappearing in a flash of green flames, leaving three stunned people behind.

Why would the man that had helped him so much want to steal the Stone?

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

In the wake of Dumbledore's departure, the atmosphere within the living room was tense. Harry was still slightly in shock, unbelieving that the man who had spent so much time teaching him had invaded his mind.

"Harry, please do not blame yourself for any of this," Nicolas urged, his voice uncharacteristically soft. "There was no way that you could have known what was going on."

He shook his head violently and jumped up from his chair.

"You don't get it! Quirrell probably looked into my mind, and saw that the Stone was hidden in the third-floor corridor. What if he steals the Stone because of me?"

Perenelle immediately got up and encircled him with her arms. Harry initially fought her, but gave up quickly, folding into her warm embrace.

"Dumbledore is going to prevent anything from happening," she assured him. "Regardless, if anything is to happen, it will be entirely Quirrell's fault. You are without fault here, Harry."

He nodded against her, the feelings of guilt receding.

"Why did Dumbledore hide the Stone at Hogwarts?" he asked, hoping to take his mind off his own guilty conscience by getting answers to questions that had long been bothering him.

"Hogwarts is the most secure location in Britain," Nicolas stated simply. "If a thief could get past our complex wards, that left precious few places where it could be hidden."

He supposed that made sense, especially considering it was the only place where Dumbledore would have been able to keep a close eye on it. Even so, wasn't it a bad idea to hide something so valuable among children?

"But, isn't that dangerous?" Harry asked. "That explosion echoed throughout the entire school."

Perenelle nodded.

"Indeed it did, Harry. I do not want to go into detail regarding the protections around the Stone, but suffice it to say, it is well protected. The explosion you heard was one of the outer wards being tripped. Loud, but not hugely destructive. As you are no doubt aware, the two students involved were seventh-year Ravensclaws,

accomplished in Ancient Runes and warding in general. Even two of the most advanced students in the school with regards to warding could not make it past the third defense."

"What about Quirrell, though?"

Perenelle sighed.

"That's what doesn't make sense here. From what Dumbledore has told us, the only professors actually capable enough to crack the wards would be Babbling, Burbage, Flitwick, McGonagall, Snape and Vector. Quirrell is skilled in Transfiguration, Charms and Potions, but never got the grasp of warding."

"So my missing time might actually be a coincidence?" Harry asked hopefully.

"Indeed," Perenelle agreed, giving him an encouraging smile. He allowed himself to hope, as the alternative was something he didn't want to consider unless left with no other options.

His mind eased slightly, he sat back down, waiting for Dumbledore to come back.

Harry began to grow worried as an hour passed, without any further word from Dumbledore. How bad could it have been?

He jumped back as Fawkes suddenly appeared in a flash of fire. The phoenix let out a small trill, before delivering an envelope to Perenelle.

"Thank you, Fawkes."

The bright red phoenix let out another trill before disappearing in another burst of flame.

Her hands moving quickly, Perenelle tore into the envelope and pulled out a letter. She read it quickly, before confusion found its way onto her face.

"What is going on?" Nicolas asked, concerned.

"Albus didn't say much, but the Stone is safe, and Quirrell is innocent. He will be by tomorrow with more information."

Harry was vastly relieved by the news. Apparently his memory hadn't been tampered with. He smiled wide, pleased by the news. Though was really scared for a while, it seemed like things were turning around.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

At ten o' clock the next morning, Dumbledore once again arrived via the Floo connection. Harry jumped up from the book, a wide smile upon his face. Finally, all his doubts were going to put to rest.

His smile died immediately upon seeing the Headmaster of Hogwarts.

Dumbledore seemed to have aged ten years overnight. There were dark circles beneath his bloodshot eyes, bereft of the twinkle that was his trademark. It looked as if he hadn't slept at all last night.

"What happened?" Harry whispered fearfully.

"I am sorry to say so, but Professor Burbage took her own life last night."

He was shocked by the news. Professor Burbage? The professor that didn't seem to care about her teaching at all, but was the first on-scene when a student might have been hurt, killed herself? It just didn't make sense.

"I know, Harry, I was just as surprised as you were," Dumbledore sympathized, as if reading his mind.

"How did it happen?" Perenelle asked softly.

"Upon reaching Hogwarts, I was alerted that a woman had broken into the third-floor corridor. I made my way there, and broke through the door, disabling the wards just in time to see Charity make her way through the final door."

"Wait, Professor Burbage was after the Stone?" Harry asked incredulously.

"Sadly, it would seem so. When I entered into the room housing the Stone, she found herself unable to bypass the final layer of defense. I tried to stun her, but she pulled a vial from her robes and drank it. She was dead within moments."

The room was silent following Dumbledore's account. He found himself unable to reconcile the suicidal thief with the strong, quiet woman that Charity had been.

"Did she...say anything before the end?" Perenelle asked delicately.

Dumbledore let out a deep, sorrowful breath.

"Charity said that she would never be taken alive, and that the Dark Lord would return."

"That is absolutely crazy," Nicolas observed. "She was not a Death-Eater."

"No, she was not," Dumbledore confirmed. "While Charity was one of the few witches at Hogwarts skilled enough to break through the Stone's protections, that is the only plausible aspect of this whole situation."

"So she was obviously coerced!" Perenelle declared.

Dumbledore shook his head slowly.

"Je n'arrive pas à le croire," Nicolas said quietly. "Did she use the Heretic's Declaration?"

"She did," Dumbledore solemnly confirmed, before turning to Harry. "The Heretic's Declaration came into use during the height of the war between Europe's magical nations and the Vatican. Witches, rather than be publicly humiliated, would ingest the potion in front of crowds, taking their own lives rather than being executed. If a person was under the Imperius, or any sort of mind-altering potion, they would suffer a long, painful death."

"She died quickly, didn't she?" Harry asked.

"Indeed she did."

"Albus, surely you are aware the evil made possible by the Dark Arts," Perenelle implored, searching for another answer.

"I am, Perenelle. I did the examination myself, searching for any traces of Dark magic, but there was none."

Silence followed Dumbledore's statement. As horrible as it may have been, it appeared that Professor Burbage had acted of her own accord. He thought back to the day of the explosion, where Charity, paying no heed to her own safety, had rushed into an unknown situation, thinking a student might be hurt. Come to think of it, Quirrell had been with her.

"What about Quirrell?" Harry suddenly asked.

"Minutes after Charity's passing of the mortal coil, Quirinus confronted me in the third-floor corridor. He said, quite regretfully, that he had been placed under the Imperius curse by Burbage."

"Wait, so he did erase my memory?"

"I am afraid so, Harry," Dumbledore confirmed, his voice heavy. "He was forced to sift through your memories, find the location of the Stone, and give it to Burbage. When he died, the curse was lifted."

He went to argue with the point, but stopped himself. It was common knowledge that Harry was one of Quirrell's favorite students. It wouldn't be a stretch for Burbage to realize that eventually the two would be alone, and Quirrell would have the opportunity to look through his mind.

"Do you think he's telling the truth?" Harry asked, not knowing what to think.

Dumbledore spent a few moments composing his reply.

"As incredible as the story seems, it fits together in a logical fashion, with minimal flaw. From an emotional standpoint, however, I am not without doubt."

"Why?"

"Quirinus was sorted into Hufflepuff upon his arrival at Hogwarts, in the late nineteen-seventies. A more honest boy you could not hope to meet, even if his concentration was always slightly lacking. Though he matured through his years, rising to teach Muggle Studies, he was still essentially the same person."

Dumbledore sighed, rubbing his temples, before resuming.

"Almost two years ago, Quirinus stepped down from his teaching position, in order to travel the world. He never explicitly stated it, but I believe his goal was to gain enough worldly knowledge to acquire the Defense position. I said goodbye, and wished him luck. The next time I saw him, Quirinus was a changed man."

"How?"

"Gone was the easy laughter and camaraderie he shared with people. In its place was a man with little use for humor, with a demeanor not unlike the Aurors who saw heavy battle during the wizarding war. He refused to talk about his experiences traveling the world, but whatever he saw; it changed him into a new man."

"You don't trust him anymore, do you?" Harry asked.

"I do not," Dumbledore admitted. "There is nothing abhorrent about his behavior or actions, but – please take this with a grain of salt, but I sense that he is laughing at me sometimes, as if he is part of some giant, malevolent joke that no one else knows the punch line to."

"Was he really put under the Imperius?" Nicolas asked.

"Yes, which I confirmed," Dumbledore answered. "As multiple studies have shown, a wizard under the Imperius is fully aware of their actions, but has no means of disagreeing with or resisting orders."

"Is he powerful enough to break the Imperius?" Nicolas pressed. "Even an average wizard slowly becomes immune to its effects, with time."

"Quirinus claimed to only be under the Imperius for several weeks, and was beginning to fight it."

"Did you question him with Veritaserum?" Perenelle asked.

"He offered first," Dumbledore answered, "just as long as the questions being asked were agreed on before hand."

"So he is hiding something then," Perenelle concluded.

Dumbledore shook his head.

"I don't know what occurred during his travels, but he does not wish to speak about it, or give out any information regarding it. He wanted assurances that the line of questioning would only pertain to the situation at hand."

"But you still don't trust him?" Harry asked.

"No, I do not. Although I cannot fathom why, Quirinus might actually be after the stone. Therefore, I have improved the security measures surrounding the Stone, most notably, the surveillance."

"More paintings?"

Dumbledore nodded.

"Half of the portraits in my office are being rearranged as we speak. Not only will the main third-floor corridor be under watch, but every room off it, and every room in the vicinity. If anyone travels within ten feet of the door, I will know."

"What are you going to do about Quirrell?" Perenelle demanded, her tone dangerous. "He already has harmed Harry once; I will not allow it to happen again."

"Seeing as his story absolves him from blame, I will do nothing to him," Dumbledore began. Perenelle began to rage, but Dumbledore raised a finger, imploring for time to explain. "However, he is the most likely culprit, even if I have no idea how. For that reason, the school's portraits have been ordered to watch his every move."

"That is not enough, and you know it!" Perenelle exclaimed, pointing her finger at the Headmaster.

"I agree," the Headmaster calmly replied. "That is why in conjunction with the portraits, I will have two Hogwarts house-elves trailing Quirrell at all times. If there are indiscretions of any sort, I will be the first to know."

"So it would appear that you are waiting for him to make the first move?" Nicolas observed.

"Indeed I am. Even if I do not trust Quirinus, he has confirmed his innocence. I can take no action unless I have evidence of his complicity."

Perenelle didn't look happy with the turn of events, but chose to forgo any argument. Harry found himself thankful, since at the rate they were going, he would not have been surprised if Perenelle had suggested he finish out his term at Beauxbatons. He was suddenly glad he hadn't told her about the malice he received from the other Slytherins.

With the current matter closed, Dumbledore moved on.

"If you are willing, I could use your assistance at Hogwarts, with the modified Virginia creeper I mentioned to you."

"Certainly," Perenelle replied. "Would tomorrow be good?"

"Indeed it would."

"What's a Virginia creeper?" Harry asked.

Perenelle's eyes lit up slightly at Harry taking an interest to anything Herbology-related.

"The Virginia Creeper is a non-magical vine, used for architectural detailing. However, I have been working on a strand that can be used in a structural fashion, and has immunity to magic."

"Oh, are you going to cover the door with it?" Harry asked.

"Indeed we are," she confirmed. "The only way to get around it would be to use either Fiendfyre, which would be suicide, or oxalobacter formigenes, which is not too common," she finished, with a chuckle.

"Um, what?"

She smiled at his less-than-articulate question.

"Oxalobacter formigenes is a bacteria found in the large intestine of humans, which quickly breaks down the oxalate prevalent in the Virginia Creeper."

"Oh – okay," Harry replied. That didn't seem like much of a problem. What were the odds of Quirrell harvesting someone else's guts to break down a barrier?

Harry certainly hoped they were bad.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Author Notes:

Right on schedule this time. I plan on releasing Interlude II next week. However, I am on call over the long weekend, so if things start to go wrong at the plant, it will delay the chapter. I'm going to do some rather odd stuff with it, so I'm curious to see how it's received.

Any comments, suggestions or criticisms would be deeply appreciated, and inspire me to write as opposed to playing video games. Even a quick "I liked it," or, "it sucked" will suffice. I'll make an effort to answer every review I get.

Thanks to my co-conspirator, darklordmike, for his valuable assistance with plotting, characterization, continuity and grammar. His efforts save me a ridiculous amount of time with the editing process, and are deeply appreciated. Also, thanks to Mira Mirth and Charmscharles for the helpful suggestions.

DLP Thanks:

The Lord of Chaos for correction of my porous grammar and Oz for catching a glaring logistical error.

Interludium II: Prayalic Withdrawal

October 31, 1981

Voldemort only had time to widen his eyes before his own killing curse was deflected back at him, its power amplified ten-fold. In true terror for the first time in his life, his fingers loosened, his yew wand dropping to the floor.

The green spell disintegrated his body upon contact, passing through it as if it were immaterial, leaving behind only a burning, soul-deep agony. Defeated, he took flight from Godric's Hollow without looking back.

How could this have possibly happened? How had he, Voldemort, the most powerful wizard in the world; be defeated by some foolish mudblood's protections? Or had it nothing to do with the figure of Severus' infatuations? Was Harry Potter the child of prophecy because of a power so great that it manifested from birth?

The doubt and the questions continued to torment him as he continued his flight. Without a body, he merely floated over dark landscapes, edging closer to his destination. Frustratingly, though without apparent physical form, the constant agony persisted. Was this a part of horcrux creation that was undocumented?

Logically, his horcruxes should have prevented his death, which certainly appeared to be the case, as his current thought process proved. Death was unending, unrelenting, a void of nothingness and the end of everything. Thought alone confirmed his horcruxes worked, but did nothing to explain the physical agony, which was admittedly a minor price to pay for immortality.

However, it was not safe to stay within Britain. Though he would not admit it to anyone, if Dumbledore ever found him in this state, his advanced knowledge of Light magic may prove too much for him to overcome, in this weakened, pathetic state. No, it was better to withdraw to the one safe place in the world, where he would never be found.

By day, he hid within the shadows, hiding from a world that may have been hunting him. By night he traveled swiftly, like a cold breeze traveling eastward across Europe. He quickly lost track of

the days, all sense of time reduced to merely night and day.

Eventually, perhaps a year later, perhaps a millennium later, he arrived. It was deep within the Albanian wilderness, the place he had discovered so many years ago, long before simple mention of his name could inspire fear. Though without a body, a chill penetrated his soul as he passed into the large clearing within the dense forest.

Once beyond the borders of the trees, all vegetation fell away, replaced by the start of a vast circular clearing, comprised of dust and stone, a perfect wasteland within the lush forest. Not even non-sentient life could abide the pulse of decay at the center of the clearing.

The bones of various creatures dotted the dusty landscape, almost exclusively of the avian variety. All other creatures turned away long before they reached the clearing, nightmares long-forgotten clawing at their respective consciousnesses.

In the center of the clearing, from which the pulse emitted, lay a stone structure. It may have once been a majestic temple comprised of ebony stonework, but the hands of time and the rough touch of the elements had taken its toll. Faded statues, their features worn down to nothing, lined the alcoves which adorned the temple's exterior.

As before, every impulse in Voldemort's being urged him to turn back, that no good could come from this. Yet, above all he acknowledged power, and the forces here trumped anything he had ever come into contact with.

Like the maw of some gigantic creature, the entrance of the temple loomed in front of him. No sunlight penetrated its darkened depths, as if it actually repelled the light. With every fiber of his tattered soul in protest, Voldemort entered the well of the worlds.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Winter, 1988

Seven years after arriving at the temple, Voldemort emerged. It had been a long, trying process, but his sanity had endured. He was still

in wraith from, but the burning had subsided, and he felt stronger. There had been a price to pay, but nothing without cost was ever worthwhile.

Without a look back, he ventured into the woods, towards the direction of the village he had passed through nearly a decade ago. As he moved closer, he heard the distinctive sound of boots crunching over the fallen leaves. Up ahead, a hundred yards, was a muggle man. Sticking to the underbrush of the shadows, he made his way towards the man. He turned right as Voldemort advanced, his senses alerting him something was wrong, but by then, it was already too late.

Like smoke, he settled into the muggle, wearing his flesh like a suit. He easily dominated the man's will and began to scan his memories. Apparently he was hunting for game, and the large, bulking object, called a 'rifle', was capable of killing. It was not nearly as effective as a wand, but a useful tool, nonetheless. Slinging it around his shoulder, he dug deeper into the muggle's mind. As luck would have it, the man was a carpenter by trade, and had a shop in his basement.

Already fate was turning in his favor.

After a few minutes of searching, he found a yew tree, and snapped off a branch. Walking back towards the muggle's home, he began to call to his reptile brethren in Parseltongue, summoning them. As he walked, snakes of every variety began to emerge from the underbrush and follow him, like some sort of bizarre variation of the pied piper.

At the edges of the muggle's property, he turned and addressed his scaly contingent, which referred to him as the 'snake god'. In a series of hisses, he commanded them to find him a knarl, and to bring it back to him, alive. His reptilian followers immediately slithered off to do his bidding.

Voldemort knew very little about power tools, but fortunately his host did, providing him with an encyclopedia's worth of knowledge on the subject. Using a tape measurer to mark, he cut the yew branch's thickest section to a length of thirteen inches, and then used the milling machine to smooth out the rough piece of wood. He ran a thumb over the outside edge of what would be his new wand, and

found it to be flawless. Satisfied, he then drilled out the center of the yew, leaving room for the magical focus.

Striving through the workshop, he went upstairs and into the kitchen. The muggle's wife, Venera, offered a greeting, which he ignored. Rummaging through the cabinets, he came away with a large wooden bowl and spoon, carelessly knocking everything else aside. The wife grabbed his arm, but shrank back from his gaze, her eyes fearful. He considered killing her for a moment, before quickly deciding she was more useful to him alive.

Leaving the kitchen, he walked past the muggle's children, currently rooted in front of the television, to the backyard. Once there, he let out another series of hisses, calling his servants to him. A single adder at the front of the group clasped a paralyzed knarl between its jaws, laying it at his feet. He thanked the adder for its loyal service, before picking up the small creature. It did look rather similar to a hedgehog, save for the rigidity of the quills upon its back.

Back in the muggle's workshop, he took a pair of pliers and began to tear the quills from the back of the knarl. Though still paralyzed by the venom, its eyes darted around in terror at the treatment, helpless as Voldemort deposited the blood-tipped quills into the wooden bowl.

After extracting most of the quills, he held the still creature over the bowl, unceremoniously slitting its throat, causing a small rivulet of blood to drip into the bowl. Once drained, he carelessly tossed the lifeless body over his shoulder, and began to use the spoon to mash the quills and blood together. After a few minutes, the two components coalesced into a thick, brownish paste. Carefully, he began to spoon the paste into the hollow of the yew, sealing the hole once it was filled.

Voldemort gave his fabricated wand a wave, letting out a few motes. It was certainly roughly made, a very pale substitute for his former wand, but he did not currently have access to any phoenix feathers. His magic would probably be even weaker than expected, using a muggle host, since he can't amplify his own meager magical resources with another magical core. With a downward wave, he cast a cutter from his wand, which struck uneventfully, only slightly gouging into the wood. Not nearly as potent as what he was used to, but it would be enough to suit his purposes.

Conveniently, the muggle's wife chose that moment to come down the stairs, chattering angrily in rapid Albanian. Voldemort turned to her, and cast the Imperius Curse on her. His spells might be weak, but the Unforgivable, fueled by the river of hate he possessed, lacked little. After casting a barely functional translation charm, he ordered the woman, her striking blue eyes blank, to gather their children and bring them downstairs, one by one.

Venera returned first with their youngest child in tow, Tomor, a small boy with his mother's dark hair, no older than seven. The boy looked at the wand in his father's hand oddly, but his eyes went blank before he could ask any questions, Voldemort's Imperius quickly dominating his will. Beneath his thrall, he instructed Tomor to go into the woods and begin to gather various herbs and small animals. He repeated this process with the other two children, Ylli and Zamir. After a moment's consideration, he ordered Venera to do the same.

Alone, he went back upstairs, into the kitchen. He carelessly ripped open a bottom cabinet, scattering more cookware in pursuit of a large pot. It was nowhere near as good as a cauldron, but his resources were rather limited. He threw the pot onto the stove, smashing the heavy object against the burner, before going back outside to survey the property.

According to the memories which swirled about his host's mind, there were large rocks sticking out of the ground at various points around the property. He would probably be safe from attack here, but his prudent sense of self-preservation had served him well in the past. Moving towards the north edge of the property, he saw that a large slab of granite did indeed protrude from the ground.

Aiming his wand at the piece of stone, a stream of magic sprung from it, cutting into the stone. After a few seconds of continuous use of the carving spell, however, his wand began to grow hot. He immediately cancelled the spell, as he couldn't run the risk of igniting his makeshift wand. Voldemort was many things, but a wandmaker was not one of them.

Having conceded there would be no wards for the foreseeable future, he made his way back into the kitchen, where the muggle's family had begun to pile the potion ingredients upon the dining room table. Pleased, he began to carefully chop at them.

While the Imperius Curse was completely adequate for controlling the family, it did not work on large numbers of people. At around six people, it became hard to assert complete control.

For large scale control, the Mindslave Potion was often employed. Igniting the burners beneath the pot, Voldemort began to brew the base for the Dark potion, illegal across most of the wizarding world. Luckily for him, the base ingredients for the Mindslave Potion were comprised of very common plants and herbs. The main ingredient, which gave the concoction its "Dark" classification was much more difficult to make, and could not be harvested as simply as the rest.

A half-hour later, his host sweating profusely, Voldemort stared into his creation. It looked to be textbook quality, a dark green, with a bright sheen to its surface. It had been much more complicated to use a stove to brew the potion's base, but he had little choice in the matter. The first part of the Mindslave Potion completed, he cast a stasis spell on it, preserving its form until he was ready to add the final ingredient.

Voldemort then retreated into the living room, and moved the furniture around, clearing a large space in the center of the hardwood floor. Carefully using his wand, he put his years of runic study to use, and began to trace outlines on the bare floor. Within fifteen minutes, the diagram was complete, each part outlined in a shining blue radiance.

It was a circle, three feet in diameter. Upon the inside edge of the circle, positioned at sixty degree intervals, perpendicular to the circle's edge, were elder Futhrak runes. A simple, but effective set, which was relatively easy to carve. Between each rune, connected to the enclosing circle, was a perpendicular line that extended to a point in the center, which is connected with the other five lines, effectively splitting the circle into six precise slices.

Carefully, he began to carve into the wood along the blue outlines. While his makeshift wand was ill-suited for carving into stone, he could get away with carving into wood as long as he didn't work continuously. The process was slow, but after another half-hour, the carving was complete. With a mental command, he summoned the daughter, Ylli. Blank-eyed, she had no reaction as Voldemort grasped her arm. With practiced ease, he thrust his knife into the

crook of her elbow, and flayed her arm all the way to the wrist, leaving behind a wasteland of exposed muscle and tendons. He carefully levitated the generous amounts of spilt blood into the hollows of his carving, completely filling them with the thick crimson liquid. For any Dark ritual, there was no finer a magical conduit than blood forcibly taken from a virgin girl.

He positioned the rapidly paling girl upon the circle, with her forehead at the circle's center point, her dark hair splayed around it. Quickly, he began to chant in a strange tongue. As he did so, the runic characters begin to pulse with an unholy crimson light, while a source-less wind began to swirl around the room. As he continued on, both the light and the wind increasing in intensity, he withdrew the knife once again.

The ritual reaching its crescendo, Voldemort jabbed the knife down with all his strength, skewering the girl's forehead against the floor. The crimson light exploded as he did so, before quickly fading away. The dead girl's eyes sank into her sockets as the brain behind them liquefied into a black ichor, and proceeded to leak out her ears. He carefully harvested all the black liquid into a small pan, before returning to the kitchen, and placing a small amount of the black substance in the green potion base.

The two liquids churned when put into contact with one another, before coalescing together into a green so dark it was almost black. Voldemort inspected the finished product for a moment, before concluding it was perfect. However, it was only intended for use on wizards, not muggles. Voldemort supposed there was only one way to discover how they reacted to the Mindslave Potion.

Ladling out a small portion, he motioned for Tomor to step forward, and poured it down the small boy's throat. For a few moments, everything looked fine, but an expression of pain crossed Tomor's formerly blank features. Without warning blood began to seep from his nose, dripping onto the white floor below. He let out a weak cry of pain as the blood vessels in his eyes burst, turning the whites of his eyes red, before collapsing to the floor, unmoving.

Voldemort looked at the still body impassively, deep in thought. Judging by the burst blood vessels, it suggested a great pressure behind the eyes, most likely brain trauma. It was entirely possible that the mind-depressant was too strong for muggles. If that were

the case, then halving the amount of liquefied brain matter might be adequate.

With a wave of his arm, Voldemort called forth the remaining child and the mother, ordering them to gather enough ingredients to create another base for the Mindslave. The boy quickly ran off to do his master's bidding.

However, the mother did not, and merely continued to stand in place. Voldemort, intrigued, moved closer. Possessing no magic of her own, it should have been almost impossible for a muggle to resist a direct order. Running his wand over her with a quick diagnostic charm, to his amazement, he found that she had a partially formed magical core. With satisfaction, he realized that the mother was a squib.

Without hesitation, Voldemort left behind his current host and settled into the mother. She fought him the best she could, but he crushed her will effortlessly and assumed control. Using her bright blue eyes to focus, he glanced at the husband, who was staring down at his dead son, in shock.

Plucking the makeshift wand from the muggle's hands, Voldemort launched a bludgeoner at the husband. The spell struck him in the mouth, shattering his teeth with a loud crunch. Broken for his paralysis, he clamped both hands over his mouth, blood spilling out between his fingers.

Voldemort smiled. While his spells weren't close to their normal potency, the squib's meager magical resources had amplified his spells slightly. The man let out a large moan of pain, prompting Voldemort to stun him. He fell to the ground, teeth fragments spilling out of his open mouth upon impact.

An hour later, the remaining child returned. Zamir stepped over their dead brother and unconscious father without a look downward, and presented his findings to his 'mother'. Voldemort brewed another batch of the Mindslave Potion base, and added in a far smaller amount of liquefied brain than before. Upon testing it upon the young teenager, there was no ill effect, save for slightly engorged veins. Pleased, he began to sort through the mother's memories.

It seemed that there was no main water source, and everyone within the small town had personal wells for their households. Voldemort quickly ordered the child to take bucketfuls of the Mindslave Potions, and to dump it in every well around town. As he bounded off to do his bidding, Voldemort smiled.

While normally a smile was a beautiful thing upon Venera's porcelain skin, blue eyes and dark hair, her smile right now would have sent the stoutest of hearts screaming in fear. Things were off to a good start, but there was still much to do until his vessel arrived.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

April 24, 1990

"Blood pops."

At the mention of the password, the gargoyle slid aside, admitting the Hogwarts' Muggle Studies professor into the entryway. Quirinus Quirrell was well-aware that he was five minutes early for his appointment with the Headmaster, but showing up early had always been a habit of his.

He ascended the spiral staircase quickly, and stepped into the circular office. Albus Dumbledore, Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, had his head down. His long, grey beard was splayed all over the sheaf of parchment he was pouring over, a severe frown upon his face. Chuckling slightly to himself, he wondered how the Headmaster was able to read anything with his beard in the way.

Dumbledore apparently heard the silent laughter and looked up, his face brightening. With a relieved sigh, he pushed aside the parchment.

"Good evening, Quirinus. You provide a welcome distraction from the constant battles I must wage with the Board of Governors."

"I doubt a few bureaucrats are going to be the end of you, sir," Quirrell replied with a smile.

"Please, Quirinus," the Headmaster implored with mock exasperation, "you are no longer a student here, and thus are no longer required to be polite, as much as I appreciate the gesture. As

for your point...well, it certainly is a debatable one. Would you care for a lemon drop?"

Quirrell shook his head at the candy dish, and politely declined. Dumbledore didn't seem put-out at all, as if he had already known what the answer would have been.

"So, to what do I owe the pleasure?" Dumbledore asked, leaning forward, with his hands folded upon the desk.

"I greatly appreciate you hiring me for the Muggle Studies position," Quirrell said carefully, "as it was a foothold as Hogwarts I would never have gotten otherwise."

"You have done fine work here, and have never given me pause to regret my decision."

"Thank you, s- Albus," Quirrell corrected. "As much as I appreciate the opportunity, I plan to take a sabbatical from teaching at Hogwarts."

"I see," Dumbledore replied, peering over the tops of his half-moon glasses. "What calling has won the favor of your attention?"

"Well..." he began, fidgeting slightly, "I've been feeling increasingly detached from the material I teach. With the muggleborn population of Hogwarts increasing each year, combined with the typical crop of purebloods that have no interest in Muggle Studies, I have found that my lack of interest in the subject is mirrored by my students."

Dumbledore nodded sympathetically, which soothed Quirrell's mind, as he didn't know what reaction to expect upon giving his resignation.

"Admittedly, it is quite difficult to interest Hogwarts students of the pureblood variety in the lives of muggles. What do you plan to do instead?"

"I'd like to travel the world, gain practical experience with the darker shades of the wizarding world."

Dumbledore smiled ruefully.

"By that token, I assume that you wish to be one day considered for the next Defense instructor opening?"

"Correct, but if history is any indication, I'll need all the experience I can get to overcome the curse that seems to plague the defense position."

"The position has seemed to have brought an unusually bad string of luck to those who hold it," Dumbledore admitted. "How do you intend to further your education with regards to the Dark Arts?"

"I have a few destinations in mind. Siberia has had recent reports of severe vampire attacks, as apparently a rogue clan has been breaking the treaty. I've also heard of Inferi attacks in southern Italy, so there might be a novice necromancer there. Also, I plan on stopping in Albania for a few months."

A heavy silence followed his last statement. As it stretched, he felt compelled to break it.

"I...I didn't think you would approve," he admitted.

Dumbledore sighed deeply.

"I suppose it is safe to assume that you have heard of the stigma surrounding Albania."

"There have been various rumors," Quirrel said carefully, "that during the last wizarding war, Voldemort had been seen in Albania, deep in the country side. No one could confirm the reports though, or could ever figure out what drew him there. I hope to find it."

Dumbledore appraised the young professor for a moment, something indescribable in his eyes.

"Quirinus, I urge you to reconsider that destination," the Headmaster said, his voice lowered. "You have a brilliant mind and a bright future, but going to Albania will put all of that in jeopardy."

Despite the ominous tones, he found himself intrigued.

"What's so bad about it?"

"No one knows," Dumbledore answered gravely. "For centuries, many prominent wizards have traveled deep into the heart of Albania, hoping to gain the same experience you hoped for, but many are never seen again."

"You haven't been there?"

Dumbledore shook his head.

"I have not. It remains one of the greater mysteries of the wizarding world. All I know is that the Unspeakables fear it."

Quirrell wasn't sure if he believed that one. Surely the Headmaster wasn't lying to him, but it was said to be impossible to cause an Unspeakable to blink.

"Please, Quirinus, I speak only with your safety in mind. Some things are best left undisturbed."

With his warning given, Dumbledore stood up, and extended a hand to Quirrell. He met it, the Headmaster's usually kind eyes tinged with sadness.

"Take care of yourself, and may luck be with you on your journey."

"Thank you, Albus."

He left the Headmaster's office consumed within the grip of curiosity, a plan forming in his mind, Dumbledore's words ringing in his head.

Wizards didn't just disappear.

Right?

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

September 13, 1990

For two months, Quirinus Quirrell traveled around Albania, trying to pinpoint where He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named had traveled during his time in-country. As he expected, there was not exactly a wealth of information of the subject.

Still, from tavern to tavern he had traveled, a rough translation charm his only tool, and conversed with the locals. If one was careful to not ask too many questions, in the dark watches of the night, where copious amounts of alcohol lowered one's inhibitions, the stories would begin.

They spoke of a small section of the country, deep in the heart of the Albanian woods, where people were known to disappear. If a wanderer were to mention traveling to the fringes of the Sult municipality, they were urged to reconsider. Muggle-repelling charms kept most of the muggles away, but strange things were said to happen at a small village bordering Sult.

An unusually high number of the population suffered from horrible nightmares, chronic insomnia and depression. It was said the suicide rate was four times the national average, and infant mortality was far greater than it should be.

With no wizarding establishments in the area, it had taken some time to pinpoint the exact place mentioned, but after weeks of searching, he had found it, apparating outside the village limits, he followed the main road in.

From the moment the town came into sight, it was obvious things were not right. Late afternoon, in a small, modern-village, there should have been children playing, engines working, some sign of life. Instead, all that he heard was the howl of the wind.

The center of town comprised of only a few buildings; a small hostel, a restaurant, a tavern and a general store. All of them were in serious disrepair: signs faded, shutters hanging loose from windows where the glass and frames were broken. It was as if the entire population had uprooted themselves overnight. How did something like this happen in a modern village?

Even more disturbing than the absence of life, however, was the intense pressure bearing down upon him from all sides, almost like his brain was being squeezed. He was at a loss to explain it, but it was as if the air was heavier, stale. This had to be where Voldemort came, but for what purpose?

Though the hostel was clearly deserted, he entered it, hoping to find a comfortable bed to rest upon for the night. There was a great deal

of exploring to be done tomorrow, which would be difficult without a good night's sleep. The interior of the inn was just as dilapidated as the outside. In the tiny lobby, a thin layer of water covered the entire floor, while putrid, dark mold climbed the walls. As the feeble light provided little illumination, he cast a light spell in the dark interior, and moved towards the stairs. Maybe the upper level wouldn't have as much water damage.

Checking through the upstairs rooms, all of which lacked any signs of human life, Quirrell found that the one in the southeast corner might be habitable with a little work. It took a solid hour of cleaning, filtering, vanishing and repairing charms, but at the end of his efforts the room was almost presentable. Going back into the hall, he laid rudimentary wards at either end. They wouldn't last longer than the night, but that was all he needed, a simple alarm ward. With the perimeter set, he went back into the room and magically locked the door. While the village certainly seemed deserted, he would have been insane to sleep unprotected in a place that felt so fundamentally wrong.

Unsurprisingly, despite the long day, it was a long time before sleep claimed him. His mind constantly worked over the problem, highlighting how little sense all of this made. How did a muggle village, with at least a few hundred people by his guess, disappear? It didn't appear like any great act of destruction drove people away, everything looked relatively undisturbed. The town was just in a state of massive disrepair, like no maintenance had been done.

How did this make any sense? Didn't the people here have families in other cities? Shaking his head, determined to get at least some sleep, Quirrell tried to push the case of out his mind. After what seemed like hours, he succeeded, but even that was a hollow victory. His sleep was restless and uneven.

Quirrell awoke several times throughout the night, his body trembling, as if in mortal terror. However, the nightmare faded away like sand through his fingers. All that remained were vague impressions of malevolent shadows, dancing at the edge of his consciousness.

Just as he began to descend into slumber once again, a loud blare cut through the building. Adrenaline burning in his veins he jumped

up, wand drawn, pointed at the door. Inching closer to it, he felt the magical disturbance of anti-apparation wards wash over him.

So much for the village being deserted.

Without warning, sharp blows began to rain down upon the door, shaking it in its frame. It sounded like fist, but if they could cast wards, why weren't they using their wands to blast through the door?

No answer forthcoming, he transfigured the thin door into stone. Undeterred, the fists pounded on it for a moment, their sound muffled, accompanied by incomprehensible yells of frustration. The sounds abruptly cut out, before being resumed on the walls. As he prepared to transfigure the wall, the head of an ax broke through. It was pulled back quickly, for a second revealing the wielder.

It was a man with dirt and mange grimed into his un-groomed face. Spittle flew from his cracked and split lips as he babbled incoherently, ax raised above his head. Quirrell vanished the handle, causing it fall upon the man's head, shearing off part of his scalp. Not appearing to feel the blow, the man reached his hands through the small hole, trying to widen the gap in the wall, with no regard for the splinters digging into his hands. He quickly pulled his arm back, ripping the forearm open on a stray nail. Heedless of the severed artery pumping streams of blood out, he picked up the head of the axe and began to pound it against the wall.

As he did, Quirrell noticed that the veins of the man were darkened and engorged, a tell-tale sign of the Mindslave Potion being used on a muggle. With mounting alarm, he reflexively stunned the muggle, dropping him to the ground, but two more took his place. Was it possible that the entire town had been enslaved? And if so, why?

Various thuds against the wall regained his attention. He struck the two hands reaching through the hole with stunners before dropping to the floor and sending jets of water under the door. After a few moments, he froze the water. Immediately, heavy bodies began to fall to the floor, letting out inarticulate cries of rage.

A loud crash from behind brought him to his feet. Spinning around, he saw a man scramble off the floor, heedless to the shards of glass embedded in his arms and face. Quirrell leaned low and flipped the

charging muggle over his back, hitting the floor with a crack. He spun around after stunning the man in time to see a woman jump through the window, whom he swiftly dropped with another stunner. He rushed to the window, jumping over the prone form, to see a ladder propped up against the building. With a wave of his wand he transfigured the ladder into water, but a teenager at the top of the ladder jumped through. Quirrell tried to avoid the lunge, but he tripped over the unconscious woman and fell heavily upon his back.

The teen was on top of him immediately, struggling to rip his wand away. Thinking fast, he head-butted the attacker, his forehead breaking the teen's nose with a loud crack. The blow caused the teen to recoil slightly, allowing him to draw his wand and stun the enslaved muggle.

Breathing heavily from the exertion, he heaved the deadweight off his chest just as the wall beside him began to splinter. Unable to gain solid footing in the hallway, it appeared they had given up and moved over to the adjacent room. Jumping up, he saw axes, hammers and picks tearing through the wall. If he didn't do something soon, he'd be overrun.

Concentrating fiercely, he moved his wand in a counter-clockwise circle, before jabbing it forward.

"Amovere typhonis!"

The hurricane banisher tore through the wall, demolishing it and throwing every occupant of the room against the opposite wall. He took off in a sprint, and lowered his shoulder into a weak section of wall, breaking through it, and sprinted for the open door, the cursed muggles peeling themselves off the floor. As he went to rush down the hallway, his feet slipped on his conjured ice pond.

He only had time to consider that the puddle had been bigger than anticipated before he hit the ground with a crash, his wand flying from his grasp. He scrambled after it, reaching it, but the muggles began to pile upon him. He tried to reach up with the wand, but a foot came down upon his wrist, breaking it with a wet snap, while another foot kicked the wand from his slack fingers. Helpless, they began to rain blows down upon him. He tried to cover his face, but a sharp kick to the temple dazed him, destroying all thoughts of

resistance. He settled for weakly attempted to curl into a fetal position as consciousness began to fade.

Apparently clued into his limp state, they stopped hammering away at his flesh. His body, which he vaguely recognized as hurting like one giant bruise, was dragged downstairs, where they bound his legs and arms in thick rope. Once done, he felt himself raised high, carried on the shoulder of the muggles. Still dazed, he was in no condition to fight back and settled for just watching.

As the light from a new day dawned, they brought him away from town, into the dense woods. Even through the haze of concussion, the air felt unnatural, much more so than upon his arrival to the village. Whatever secret Albania hid, it was close.

An undetermined time and distance ahead, he began to see patches where the trees had been cleared away, and rudimentary stone structures were in various levels of construction, all forged from a dark-colored rock. In between the structures teemed countless muggles, from children all the way to the elderly, all with eyes blank, veins engorged. There were no idle hands. Every person was either chipping away with tools, excavating dirt or lugging the heavy-looking black stones.

With mounting disgust, he realized that the entire village had been literally enslaved. Whoever was behind this was using slave labor to build...well, something.

Stopped at the edge of a vast clearing, he was dumped unceremoniously to the ground. Looking around, he saw only dust and bodies in various states of decomposition, circling an ancient stone structure.

The sound of argument caught his attention and he rolled his battered body to see a woman yelling loudly at the rest of the group, becoming frenzied. They tried to restrain her, but she broke from their grasp, and began to sprint toward the stone structure. She was not followed, as the rest of the group merely screamed gibberish at her, their cries taking a pleading note.

Halfway to the temple, the woman stumbled. Without warning, like a dam bursting, crimson spurted from her nose and ears. She took one final step before slumping to the ground, unmoving.

What the hell was this place?

From the darkness of the temple, a woman emerged. She might have once been beautiful, with her soft features and long, dark hair, but a crimson gleam shone within her eyes, her features contorted by an evil smile with turned his innards to ice. With mounting terror, the malicious gaze found his own.

"I've been waiting so long for you, my vessel," the woman said in perfect English, moving closer to him.

As the phantom advanced, Quirrell discovered that he still had enough energy left to scream.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Late November, 1990

Twirling his wand idly between his fingers, wearing Quirrell like a second skin, Voldemort slowly walked the perimeter of the recently completed outer temple.

It was essentially a large, hollow ring which enclosed the inner temple, the well of the worlds. To his direct left was the east pillar, which stretched through the roof, the black stone jutting twenty-five feet into the sky. He lightly ran his fingers over the intricate carving which covered every inch of the monolith, the end result of a solid week of carving. The light was too faint to read the characters, but he felt the power of the ancient words throbbing beneath his digits, formed from a language alien to this plane of existence.

The sole light sources were the feeble rays of sunlight filtering through the precise circular holes in the ceiling. Directly below the holes, set into the stone floor, were hollow receptacles comprised of an opaque crystal, with an interior space of a cubic foot.

It had taken nearly two years, but finally, the gateway had been completed, thus fulfilling his end of the bargain.

Satisfied, he gave one final look at the crumbling temple in the center, where he had spent seven years in ascension, before quickly exiting the outer temple. He strode through the dense woods

purposefully, heading back towards the village, to the house where his original vessel currently resided.

He entered through the back, kicking aside the small decomposed form on the floor, entering into the living room. The woman sitting on the couch, staring blankly ahead, had at one time been beautiful. Now, however, her hair hung lank and full of mange, framing a prematurely lined face.

"Venera, I have good news for you," Quirrell declared with a sly smile, "you're about to become the sole indispensable person within this town."

Her face showed no reaction as Quirrell withdrew his wand and raised it high above his head, pointing towards the heavens.

"Fidelio!"

Thick ropes of magical energy shot from the yew wand, leaving bright trails behind as it sped towards the Fidelius runic boundaries. The magic fully expelled, he dropped his wand and pointed it at the woman. Moments later, the magic returned to him, and he directed it towards the woman. The shimmering mass coalesced over her, and flowed into her, disappearing in a blinding flash.

The vast magical discharge caused her eyes to regain focus, breaking through the bonds of the Mindslave Potion. She blinked a few times before staring up at Quirrell. In the blink of an eye, her expression morphed from confusion into raw hatred. She immediately jumped up and rushed towards him, screaming like a banshee. Quirrell casually sidestepped her charge and used her own momentum to bounce her headfirst off the wall. Dazed from the blow she left herself open to attack, an opportunity that Quirrell pounced upon. He quickly petrified her, and cast a translation charm.

"Write down the address of your house," Voldemort ordered, motioning to the piece of paper on the table, with a muggle pen besides it. "And be quick about it, my time is short."

His orders given, he canceled the petrification charm. Venera picked up the pencil and snapped it in half defiantly, throwing the pieces at his feet.

"Fuck bastard! Why I help son murderer?"

Quirrell's lips thinned at the comment. With a wave of his wand, the two halves of the broken pencil flew in the air, before skewering the woman's left hand, pinning it to the table.

Venera screamed in agony, and tried to pull her hand away, but couldn't move it an inch. Quirrell merely produced another pencil, placing it next to her right hand.

"Yourself go fuck, bastard!"

Quirrell moved swiftly, punching the woman in the mouth, causing her to yell and recoil in pain. As she opened her mouth, he banished then summoned her tongue, ripping it from her mouth. The pink organ, trailing blood behind it, landed neatly in his hand. He inspected it for a moment, before carelessly tossing it over his shoulder.

Unable to scream properly, Venera just moaned loudly, drool and blood dripping from between her closed lips. He motioned toward the paper again, but she shook her head in defiance. Admiring her tenacity slightly, he wrenched her mouth open, and pressed the white-hot tip of his wand on the gushing stump of her tongue. The flesh blackened and blistered after several seconds, roughly cauterizing the wound. Withdrawing the wand, he motioned again toward the paper.

Tears running down her face, unable to say anything, she just shook her head again.

"I cannot begin to understand your kind. Victory is clearly impossible, yet you fight on? Very well. Crucio!"

She tumbled off the couch beneath the power of the spell, and thrashed on the floor. After a solid minute of torture, he relented. Venera's eyes were blank following the curse, the Cruciatus triumphing over her will. She immediately crawled toward the paper, scrawling the address quickly, before curling in a ball on the floor, shivers wracking her frame.

"Why thank you, Venera. Wouldn't it have just been easier to give in? We would have reached the same destination, and you'd be in far less pain."

Silence greeted his conclusion.

"Well, unfortunately for you, while you certainly are inexpendable, that also means I have to make sure no one hurts you."

Quirrell pulled a flask from his robes, and forced the Draught of Living Death down her throat. Slowly, her spasms subsided until she could have passed for a statue. Her body preserved, he levitated her into a closet, before transfiguring the door so that it matched the wall perfectly.

His work done, he set off from the house. His work was done here, but there was much to be done back home, in Britain.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Late December, 1990

Quirrell barely felt the cold winds brush past his body, his deep contemplations blotting out physical sensation. He stood outside the ruins of the Gaunt cottage, the protections surrounding Slytherin's ring completely dismantled.

To his surprise, it had turned out that the ring had been taken. Considering the complexity of his wards and protections, and that they were still intact, it appeared that his contingency plan had worked. Lucius had acquired the ring, and sent it to Harry Potter? However, if that were the case, why was the Potter heir reported as still alive? If everything had gone according to plan, the boy should have been dead, and his former body should have been restored.

Though there were large risks involved, he had planned to merge the horcrux fragment with his soul, effectively reincarnating his form. Granted, there was a small chance that his memories since the creation of the horcrux could have been erased, but that was a chance he had been willing to take with Slytherin's ring, being the last horcrux he had created by a comfortable margin. He had spent five years looking, but had never been able to find an artifact from Gryffindor, so had resigned himself to using Slytherin's ring.

The reported presence of Dumbledore interceding on Potter's behalf was troubling. Was it possible that his greatest adversary had managed to destroy the horcrux before it devoured Potter's soul? Never one to assume the best, he was going to have to plan as if the ring had indeed been destroyed. For a short moment he considered using Hufflepuff's cup, before scrapping the idea. If his theories about horcruxes were correct, the consciousness inside the cup, created nearly fifteen years ago, would be woefully clueless with regards to the recent turn of events. If the horcrux merge ritual went wrong, all his memories from the past fifteen years would be erased, a situation he could not chance. No, he was going to have to seek another means of return.

According to what little history he had unearthed, a great number of his former Death-Eaters had renounced him to avoid a sentence in Azkaban, claiming they were under the Imperius. An asinine claim, since the Dark Mark could only be taken under one's own will, but the Ministry did not know that. While he did not blame his servants for doing so, as they were more useful outside Azkaban than within it, it also meant he could not trust them to participate in a resurrection ritual. He would have to bide his time, and discover which of his servants were still loyal to him.

With a slight crack of apparation, he arrived back at Quirrell's small flat, and began to pace.

Of all of the potential ways to restore his former body, acquiring Nicolas Flamel's famed Philosopher's Stone would probably be his best option. The Flamels lived on a magical island off the northern coast of France. It would be a small matter to contract a professional thief and reshape their minds to his needs.

Of nearly equal importance was the letter atop his kitchen table, which bore the Hogwarts crest. He picked it up for a moment, before placing it down softly. As soon as he had arrived from Albania, he had gotten in contact with the Headmaster, fully aware there would soon be a teaching vacancy, which was all but confirmed. The most recent Defense instructor, Thistlewood, had found teaching to be enjoyable, but not worth dealing with the Board of Governors. In the summer, Thistlewood would step down. The job was clearly his for the taking, but did he really want it?

After much deliberation, he concluded that accepting the position provided too many opportunities to pass up. Perhaps he would finally find the elusive Gryffindor relic to complete his ascent into immortality.

Aside from his own vitality, he had to admit that the world was changing. As useful as it may have been to unite the pureblood aristocracy beneath the banner of blood-supremacist idealism, it was only a blind fool which denied that constant in-breeding was diluting the magical skill within the wizarding world. Cleansing the muggle filth? Please, he was reasonably certain that at least half of his followers had at least a few drops of muggle blood running through their veins. Did they really think it a coincidence that some of the most brilliant minds of the past thirty years, such as Severus Snape and Lily Potter, came from the muggle world?

No, if he had any chance of realizing his ultimate goal, he would have to adapt to the winds of change, and begin to recruit outside the ranks of his current Death-Eaters. What better opportunity to gauge the potential of the next generation than by teaching them about the Dark Arts? Knowledge was often an effective motivational tool. Any students that showed promise, he could invite to join an extra-curricular class. He recalled that as a child entering Hogwarts, he had drunk up knowledge like a man dying of thirst drinks from a well.

Yes, the lure of knowledge would most likely be all the enticement that muggleborn students needed. To ease potential tension within the class, he could exclude all the children of his Death-Eaters, being already bound to him, through the marks on their parents' arms.

And who was to guess what might happen? Perhaps circumstance would even allow him access to Harry Potter, in the event he ended up attending Hogwarts.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

December 4, 1991

The moment Potter turned his back, Quirrell drew his wand and stunned the boy with a silent stunner. Moving quickly, he dragged a chair away from his desk and started to place the boy into it.

However, upon touching the boy's arm with his hand, it began to burn. He withdrew his appendage with a hiss of pain as the flesh began to slough off it, leaving behind only reddened muscle. Though the pain was almost negligible to him, his shock was much deeper, and he was at a complete loss to explain what had just occurred. Had Lily's protections lasted far longer than anticipated?

Switching his wand to the other hand, he levitated the unconscious boy into the chair, and bound him in ropes. He quickly bound his horrifically burned hand in conjured bandages, his time too short to do anything more helpful. The hand taken care of, he withdrew from Quirrell's body, causing the young man to slump to the floor, unconscious.

Like smoke he flowed through the air and tried to take control of Potter, but some unseen barrier prevented him from doing so. No matter what approach he tried, his attempts always met with failure. Raging, he began to slam his form against the invisible shield, but there was no give to the shield. Fucking Lily Potter!

With dismay, he realized that just how badly things had gone, as ten minutes had already passed. He had planned to possess the child and quickly sift through his memories, but that had proved to be an utter failure, which left him in a dangerous position. He didn't have time to do a thorough memory implant, the best he could do was make it seem like the boy had merely experienced a light-headed moment.

Voldemort quickly retreated back into Quirrell's body, and forced open Harry's eyelids, revealing his glazed eyes. Desperate to know how this mere boy managed to defeat him, he brandished his legilimency like a blunt weapon, and entered his mind. To his complete shock, an opaque blue shield surrounded the boy's mind. An occlumency shield surrounding the mind of an eleven year old? How was this even possible?

The situation grew stranger still when he found a breach in the shield, and discovered the landscape within the boy's mind. A rudimentary occlumency shield was one thing, but his mind was actually shaped! His respect, already high for the young boy, grew vastly. The dedication, the willpower needed for such things...it took a phenomenally gifted wizard years to achieve what the boy had

already accomplished in his short lifetime. Where did such determination spring from?

Digging deeper, within the bowels of the large house, he found himself at the entrance to a locked vault. Even a master legilimens such as himself had never seen such a thing. While at first Voldemort found himself immensely frustrated, as he would not be able to discover how this child originally defeated him, his viewpoint quickly shifted as the situation gained perspective.

Moving about the mindscape, he began to gaze into the stray memories floating around, which hadn't been shaped yet. Rummaging quickly through them, he was once again floored by the revelations abound.

Dumbledore destroying his horcrux; Harry surviving a direct encounter with the thief; The Malfoys nearly succeeding in resurrecting him.

Most important, however, was that the Stone, which seemed to have disappeared after the thief's failure, had been at Hogwarts the entire time. Dumbledore's arrogance had never seemed so potent. Did he really think it was safe here?

While his first impulse was to immediately rush and get it, he squashed the notion. Dumbledore had at least one painting watching the third-floor corridors, and probably countless more traps. He could probably bypass them, as he could simply compel the two hormone-driven Ravenclaws Dumbledore had caught to map the wards for him, but what of his class? What of Harry Potter?

While he was making excellent progress with the first-years, and saw clear Death-Eater potential with Davis, Smith, Zabini, Li and Goldstein, there was still Potter to consider. Digging around, he saw a vast dislike towards the Ministry, which could be turned into hate if properly inspired. If he could somehow find a way to recruit Harry into his ranks, with the promise of dismantling the corrupt British Ministry...

On that note, Voldemort withdrew from the boy's mind, the foundations of vast plans forming. It would take careful planning, but if Harry Potter reached the potential for hate within him, and stood by his side...

Who would there be to stop them?

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Author Notes:

Right on schedule yet again. My social calendar is rather full right now, so I wouldn't expect the next chapter for another two weeks. Next chapter has Harry returning to Hogwarts. If everything remains as planned, the first year is three chapters away from completion.

Any comments, suggestions or criticisms would be deeply appreciated, and inspire me to write as opposed to playing video games. Even a quick "I liked it," or, "it sucked" will suffice. I'll make an effort to answer every review I get.

Thanks to my co-conspirator, darklordmike, for his valuable assistance with plotting, characterization and continuity.

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Thirteenth Movement: Wound Upon Wound

January 5, 1992

The atmosphere within the compartment was somber on the trip back to Hogwarts. Hermione had been especially shaken by the news that Professor Burbage had taken her own life, her eyes shining with barely restrained tears.

"How well did you know her?" Harry asked, unaware that the muggleborn girl had been close to the departed Magical Ethics professor.

Hermione looked even more miserable at the question, but still answered.

"I didn't want anyone to know, but my first week of Hogwarts was...well - it was really terrible," she admitted with a sigh. "I didn't feel like I belonged here at all, and I was thinking about leaving Hogwarts."

He found himself surprised by the revelation, but Neville's reaction was even stronger.

"I'm so sorry for not seeing that," the pudgy boy said earnestly, clearly disappointed in his own actions. "I see you every day, I should have noticed!"

Hermione shook her head in negation.

"Hiding my feelings isn't exactly a new thing, Neville. Even in muggle schools, the other kids didn't care for me much, but if I pretended I never heard the insults, they left me alone."

"Not much ever changes, does it?" Millicent observed.

"No, it really doesn't," Hermione agreed solemnly. "The difference here is that there's far less kids, so the bullies don't have many options. Anyway, after my second Ethics class, Professor Burbage asked me to stay."

Hermione blushed at the memory, her expression brightening slightly.

"I thought I was in trouble, but then she took a seat next to me, and reassured me that it would get better. I asked her how she knew, as if she had any idea what I was going through," she said, smiling ruefully. "She said that when she first came to Hogwarts twenty years ago, she was just a scared muggleborn, intimidated by a world that seemed so alien. But, she did make it, and said that she knew I could too."

Tears began to spill from the corners of her eyes at the end of her explanation. Her next breath hitched, but she stifled it as best as she could.

"Is...is that the type of person who - who throws their life away so stupidly?" Hermione demanded.

"No, it doesn't make any sense," Harry awkwardly replied.

"No, it doesn't," she replied fiercely, before putting her face in her hands and sobbing.

Feeling as if he had to do something, he put an arm around her shoulder, intending to give her an encouraging squeeze. However, at the contact, she immediately circled her arms around him and buried her face in his chest. He hesitantly patted her on the back with his other hand, praying that Tracey kept any comments to herself.

As embarrassed as he was, Harry was glad to be helping, even if it was in a minimal fashion. He noticed, with slight amusement, that Millicent, Neville and Tracey were all staring intently out the window. After a few moments, Hermione let go.

"Thanks for the support," she said quietly with downcast eyes, apparently embarrassed by her actions.

"I'm glad I could help," Harry assured, not wanting to make her feel uncomfortable.

Hermione gave him a small smile, which was slowly replaced by a fiery look.

"Does anyone really believe that Burbage was working for Voldemort?"

Every voice in the compartment replied in the negative.

"Yeah, I don't think so," Harry said, "but like I said earlier, she wasn't under the Imperius Curse or a mind-control potion. Unless Dumbledore missed something, there was nothing controlling her."

"What about Quirrell?" Hermione asked, biting her lip slightly.

"From what Dumbledoe could tell, he had definitely been under the Imperius, and admitted to doing some terrible things. He didn't try to hide anything."

"Do you believe him?" Tracey asked.

Harry thought back to Christmas day. Something had come up during the conversation that he hadn't noticed then, but upon reflection, bothered him greatly.

"When I was talking with Quirrell during the fall, he said that he had been sorted into Slytherin, but over Christmas break, Dumbledore said that Quirrell was sorted into Hufflepuff when he arrived at Hogwarts."

"He might have just been trying to identify with you, to make you trust him more," Tracey pointed out.

"Yeah, I did think of that," Harry admitted, "and it might even be true, but still..."

"Still, what?" Tracey impatiently demanded.

"When Quirrell claimed he was sorted into Slytherin, he said some other things that were clearly true, that I agreed with, as if he were talking from the heart."

"They can't both be true," Tracey concluded, "so either Quirrell or Dumbledore is lying."

"I know that," Harry said. "What's important is Quirrell's lie was the most convincing one I've ever heard. Someone who could lie that

easily, and fake passion like that, even if he had nothing to do with Burbage's death..."

"He's really fucking dangerous," Tracey finished for him.

"Exactly. We're all going to have to watch our backs around him."

Neville shuddered at the implication.

"At least we don't have the extra class with him, eh Hermione," he said, relief in his voice.

The Gryffindor girl in question shook her head.

"I want to actually do something. No, if he had anything to do with Burbage's death, we need to do something."

"Dumbledore told me he has someone constantly watching Quirrell," Harry pointed out. "If he does something wrong, Dumbledore is going to know about it immediately."

"That's not enough!" Hermione exclaimed, clearly frustrated. "There must be something we can do."

"Right now, there's nothing," Harry said, shaking his head. Upon seeing her dejected, helpless expression, however, he decided to soothe her.

"But, if I think of any way that we can help, you'll be the first to know."

"Do you promise?" she asked, her eyes hopeful.

Harry nodded his head solemnly.

"I promise."

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

The news that the Magical Ethics professor had killed herself spread through the Great Hall like wildfire during dinner. The reaction as a whole seemed to be equal parts sadness and intrigue. All around Harry, speculation ran rampant.

Unsurprisingly, most of the speculation at the Slytherin table was derogatory in nature. Most seemed positively thrilled by the idea that a muggleborn professor had taken her life. Malfoy was particularly exuberant in his glee.

"I must say, Burbage was a great example to the rest of the mudbloods!" Draco loudly exclaimed, before leering at Tracey.

"So, when are you going to off yourself? I mean, your blood is just as tainted Burbage's," the blond-boy pointed out with mock helpfulness. "I hope it's soon."

Tracey's lip curled slightly at the statement, but that was her only visible reaction.

"Why is that inbred twit calling anyone's blood tainted?" she loudly asked.

"You should leave our world while you still can, or the same thing that happened to Burbage will happen to you," Draco said, ignoring Tracey's bait.

Harry, already tense from the exchange, froze at Draco's last statement. Did Malfoy know what really happened to Burbage?

"What the hell are you talking about, Malfoy?" Tracey spat.

"Oh, you haven't heard?" Draco asked gleefully. "Mudbloods aren't talented enough to get work in the wizarding world, so Dumbledore took pity on Burbage and hired her."

Malfoy's entourage guffawed at his statement. Feeling brave, Pansy joined the fray.

"Take a good look at your future, Davis," the pug-faced girl mocked.

Tracey looked like she wanted to get up and strangle Pansy, but Millicent put a large hand on her arm and shook her head.

"Ignore her, Tracey. She just seems to have forgotten how easy it is for people to kick her arse."

Tracey didn't exactly look soothed, quite the opposite, but had no chance to retort. At the Head table, Dumbledore had risen to his feet, arms raised, with a sorrowful expression upon his face. The student body swiftly fell quiet, awaiting the Headmaster's words.

"Welcome back to Hogwarts for another semester, dear students and faculty. One never wishes to be the bearer of bad news, so it is with deepest regrets that I must inform you all that Charity Burbage, our Magical Ethics professor, took her own life over the holidays. While her reasons for doing so are currently murky at best, what is of far greater importance is that she was a great professor, and an even finer person, who shall be missed by all that knew her."

"Yeah, right," Draco whispered under his breath, gaining his share of snickers from the Slytherin table. Harry felt fury begin to build within him at Draco's blatant lack of respect, and it was with great effort that he brought his attention back to Dumbledore.

"In the interim, a Ministry representative will be teaching Magical Ethics. Please welcome Stamford Jorkins."

To Dumbledore's right, in the place which had formerly been occupied by Burbage, was a balding man of medium build who harbored an expression of boredom. He raised his hand in acknowledgment, almost contemptuously. It didn't really look as if a position at Hogwarts had been his first choice, which was reflected by the lukewarm reception from the student body. With the new professor introduced, the Headmaster bade them goodnight, and dismissed them.

At the Headmaster's dismissal, the Great Hall broke into loud discussion. Looking to his right, he saw that Tracey had drawn her wand. Wincing slightly, he saw her banish a large bowl of bread pudding at Pansy, who only had time to widen her eyes.

The large bowl tipped slightly in mid-air; emptying its contents onto her a split-second before the bowl struck her in the chest, knocking her backwards over the bench. Pansy immediately jumped back up, almost completely covered by the sticky, light-yellow dessert, her eyes furious.

"Who's filthy now, bitch!" Tracey exclaimed, triumphantly pumping her right fist in the air. At the statement, Pansy went for her wand,

but stopped as Harry and Millicent drew theirs first and pointed them at her.

While Tracey had clearly overreacted, Harry didn't think another lesson in humility was the worst thing in the world for Pansy. Staring at her fuming, pudding-covered form, he was helpless to stop the smile which crept onto his face. A quick glance to his side confirmed Millicent was having similar problems.

"Smile while you can!" Pansy shrieked, "because payback is coming!"

Harry laughed at the threat, a comeback on the tip of his tongue, but it was cut off as something struck him in the shoulder, knocking him off balance.

"It was a bludgeoner!" Tracey exclaimed, spinning around. By the time he spun around, all the older Slytherins to his rear were acting nonchalant, with identical smirks, but no wands drawn.

"Put your wands away!" a voice ordered from behind them, "or it will be detention for all of you!" Turning around, Harry saw Higgs, his least-favorite Prefect, pushing through the crowd.

"No," Harry responded. "Someone hit me with a bludgeoner."

"Yeah, right," Higgs mocked, "you probably just walked into a wall. Put your wands away now!"

"Really convenient how you show up after everything's already happened," Harry accused. "Could you be any more fucking useless?"

Higgs scowled at his comment, and jabbed a finger into his chest, pushing him back slightly.

"You seem to have forgotten that I'm a Prefect, Potter. Keep in mind; I still haven't forgotten the first day of class."

"Oh, was that when I kicked your arse in front of our entire House?" Harry mockingly asked.

Higgs, enraged, looked like he was about to draw his own wand, but before he could, a large elbow caught him in the back, knocking him to the floor.

"Potter, what the bloody fuck is goin' on here?" Flint angrily asked.

"Uh, someone hit me with a bludgeoner," Harry explained, surprised by the captain's vehemence. To his surprise, Flint rounded on the group of Slytherins behind him, his expression murderous. The smirks on their faces were immediately wiped away with Flint's wrath turned upon them, and swiftly replaced by fear.

"Which one of ye soddin' cunts was stupid enough to fuck with my Seeker?" he demanded. Not a single one of them dared to respond, instead opting to stare at the floor.

"Look at me!" Flint roared, apparently not pleased by their reaction. Terrified to disobey a command from the troll-like sixth year, they reluctantly raised their heads.

"I guess ye bunch of fuckin' fairies had some fun hittin' my Seeker in the back, but it stops here. If any of ye poofs try to fuck with my Seek again, I will fuckin' destroy ye all. Understand!"

The group responded enthusiastically, nodding so fast they could have been head-banging. Flint was apparently satisfied by the reaction, and turned back to Harry.

"Get that fuckin' arm looked at, we've got a Quidditch cup to win," he demanded, stalking off before Harry had a chance to reply.

"How does it feel to have a psychotic bodyguard?" Millicent asked, clearly amused by the Slytherin Quidditch captain's antics.

"It's kinda terrifying, but looks like it will be really effective," he responded.

"Yeah, I'd say so," Tracey agreed. "No one's stupid enough to attack you on Flint's watch."

Laughing, the three of them made their way back to the Slytherin common room.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

January 8, 1992

It was with heavy anticipation that Harry arrived to Quirrell's first extra class of the semester. During the first two days of the semester, there had been heavy debate as to whether they would continue to attend the extra class. Eventually, reason won out over fear. If Quirrell was being watched constantly, there would be no way he'd be able to get away with doing anything wrong. With that fact in mind, it seemed foolish to turn down the opportunity to learn more.

Though he was tense, Quirrell conducted his class in the usual fashion. The first one of the semester was review, working through all the material they had learned the previous year. Once again working with Zacharias, Harry found himself relaxing, lost within the simple joys of using magic.

At the end of the class, Quirrell ushered them back into their seats, and addressed them from the front of the class.

"You've all made tremendous progress over the first half of the school year," he began, "but now we will begin to branch out into the more complex realms of magic. The new material will be more demanding, perhaps more so than any of your other classes, so if anyone wishes to drop the class to protect their academic interests, they are more than welcome."

Harry was intrigued by the offer. It was as if Quirrell was giving him a chance to leave his class, if he wanted. And truthfully, a part of him did. He still did not trust the Defense instructor, and didn't think he ever would again.

However, a larger part of him hungered for knowledge. On the spot, he decided to stick with it. He did not seem to be alone, as no one else spoke up at Quirrell's offer. The professor smiled once, a rare sight, before dismissing the class.

Harry gathered his belongings and moved towards the door, but Quirrell's voice froze him in his tracks.

"Could I speak to you for a minute, Harry?"

He froze in response, unsure of what to do, but knew there was no way in hell he would ever be left alone with this man again.

"We're not leaving him alone again, sir," Tracey boldly spoke, her chin held high. Harry gave her a grateful smile before focusing on the professor. Oddly, he didn't seem put out by Tracey's declaration.

"That's perfectly fine," Quirrell replied, nodding. "I think it safe to assume that Harry has told you about the horrible things I've done."

"Um, I just wanted my friends to be...warned, sir," Harry said lamely, rather surprised that Quirrell wasn't making any excuses for his actions.

"I'd have been disappointed if you had done otherwise."

"We thought you'd be upset at us not trusting you," Millicent said, speaking their collective opinion.

Quirrell shook his head.

"The opposite is true. No matter what may have happened while I was under the Imperius, it was my fault for letting my guard down, and allowing myself to be controlled like I was. No, I am completely at fault in this situation, and I am deeply sorry for all the pain I've caused."

While Harry still distrusted the Defense instructor, he also began to feel badly for him.

"I don't blame you, but I don't think I'll ever turn my back on you again, sir."

"I would expect nothing less," Quirrell stated. "It is good, especially in these dark times, to stay on guard constantly."

Harry shuffled his feet, not really knowing what to say anymore. Quirrell, sensing his unease, continued on.

"I know that the extra knowledge I've taught you all can never atone for my actions, but it is my deepest hope that it will help you to avoid the same mistake I made."

"We certainly hope so, sir," Harry replied.

"Good, good. I will see you three in class later this week. Goodnight."

With that, the Defense professor retreated to his office, leaving behind a very perplexed trio. They walked away from the classroom in awkward silence. Halfway back, it was Harry who broke the tension.

"Does anyone else feel bad about distrusting him now?" he asked.

"I...I kinda do," Millicent admitted. "He really seemed disgusted with himself, and isn't trying to make any excuses."

Tracey shrugged.

"He's lied to you before, Harry. If he had something to do with Burbage's death, he'd need to be good at lying. What do you think?"

"I don't know," Harry honestly answered. The conversation with Quirrell had brought no closure to him, and he felt like he was further from the answer than he'd ever been.

Would he ever find out the truth?

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

January 29, 1992

As the Harry began to get back into the flow of the semester, he continued to keep a watchful eye upon the Defense instructor, but was never given cause for worry. According to Dumbledore, Quirrell had done nothing to arouse any suspicion, nor had Harry observed anything out of the ordinary. However, Harry had no intention of letting his guard down. Traveling down that road once was enough for him.

Still, life went on. Classes came and went, as did his antipathy towards the majority of the Slytherins, but all told, his first month back at Hogwarts was rather pleasant. More than anything, it was

the upcoming Quidditch match against the Ravenclaw which weighed heavily upon his mind.

Marcus Flint, Slytherin's Quidditch Captain, was never going to be referred to as a pillar of mental stability, but as the big match loomed closer, his obsession with winning became even more disturbing than normal. They sometimes practiced six times a week, in every type of weather, no matter how foul.

While Flint's post-practice rants were always a mix of entertainment and terror, one could not deny their effectiveness. By the time a Slytherin team-member hit the showers for the day, they were inspired to work harder next time, as failure meant that Flint might actually follow up on his threats.

Today, however, was psychotic even by his lofty standards, apparently displeased by his team's practice habits in the freezing rain.

With a roar of rage, Flint ripped one of the benches from the locker floor, and swung it in a high arc. Montague danced out of the way, barely avoid the long oak plank which crumpled a locker door with a loud crash. Seemingly unhurt by the concussion, Flint threw down the broken bench, as if he had proved a point.

"If ye bunch o' fuckin' poofs ever practice like that again, our next practice will be next to the fuckin' Whomping Willow! Got it!"

"It's kinda hard to practice with frostbite," Bole unwisely complained, causing Harry to sigh. Bole never had been the sharpest knife in the drawer.

Flint, his face already red, grew a shade darker. Wordlessly, he turned to the wall and ripped the small blackboard off the wall. Bole, a look of apprehension upon his face, started to get up from his seated position, but with a sudden burst of speed, Flint ran up and brought the blackboard down on his head. The dark slate shattered over his skull, dropping to the floor. Bole, a dazed look on his face, and a wooden frame hanging around his neck, only had a moment's respite. Flint reached down, grabbed him by the robe and tossed him into the communal shower, where he landed with a heavy thud. The captain delivered a few sharp kicks to his ribs for good measure,

before turning on the shower head and walking back into the main part of the locker room, fuming.

"Any other whiny cunts on this sodding team 'fraid of a little water?" Flint roared, eyes darting around looking for a dissenter. Unsurprisingly, no one raised their hands.

"Good," Flint muttered. "No matter what happens on Saturday, we better not lose to those fuckin' librarians in Ravenclaw. Mark my words, if ye bunch o' poofs keep practicing like utter shite, we will lose."

Flint took a deep breath, before punching another locker door.

"Merlin's saggy balls, the fuckin' first-year is the only that's actually tryin'!"

His remaining teammates threw him covert dirty looks at the praise, which Harry was unconcerned with. If they actually stopped whining and started practicing, Flint wouldn't be so angry.

Well, then again, maybe he would.

"I better see some fuckin' effort at tomorrow's practice," Flint warned, before punching the locker again and storming off. At the captain's departure, the team let out a collective sigh of relief.

"Um, should we get some help for Bole?" Harry hesitantly asked.

Derrick snorted at his question.

"Flint's little golden boy should just mind his own fucking business."

Shrugging, Harry began to change out of his robes, his skin still cold from practice. He spent a long time beneath the hot shower head, extracting the cold chill from his bones, but felt much better afterwards. After exiting the shower, he dressed slowly, not looking forward to the trek across the grounds back towards Hogwarts. Surprisingly, he was the only one of the team who had opted to take such a long shower, and he noticed that the locker room was empty. Not exactly a tragedy, considering his presence on the team was only tolerated because he was under Flint's protection.

After a moment's procrastination, he donned his thick winter robe, and exited the locker room. He gave a sigh before grasping the exit's handle, and pulling. To his surprise, there was no give with the door. Pulling out his wand, he motioned to unlock the door.

"Expelliarmus!" a voice yelled from behind him. The force of the spell knocked him into the door, and wrenched his wand from his grip. Spinning around, he saw five figures in dark cloaks and masks.

"It's time for you to learn your place in Slytherin," the figure at the forefront threatened in a deep, unfamiliar voice.

Shite.

Turning to the side, the lead figure addressed a vastly shorter one to his right.

"Go outside and stand guard."

"This was my idea, and I'm staying," the short one replied, in the exact same tone of voice, causing Harry to deduce they were masking their voices as well.

"You don't have the heart to do what it takes," the leader replied, raising his wand threateningly. "Stinging hexes, you've got to be fucking kidding me."

The smaller figure seemed to shrivel slightly at the leader's words. His shoulders slouched, he began walking past Harry, towards the exit. The small figure gave him one final look back, which to him seemed almost apologetic, before raising his wand to unlock the door.

"Alohomora."

"What are you doing?" the leader cried, but Harry was in motion before the spell even left the small guy's wand. He dove towards him, slapping the wand away from his grasp, where it clattered to the floor. He dove after it, curses barely missing him, and took hold of the stray wand, quickly conjuring a magical shield.

One of the stray curses bounced off the shield, and struck the small figure in the shoulder, ripping off the mask, revealing the frightened

face of Draco Malfoy. The pale, wandless boy took one uneasy look at Harry, before ducking into the bathroom.

The four remaining cloaked figures continued to cast, their spells bouncing off Harry's shield, driving him backwards. He began to slowly creep to the right, hoping to just flee out the door. Unfortunately, the leader picked up on his, and transfigured the door handle into rubber. He now had no choice but to fight.

His old shield beginning to buckle, Harry quickly dropped it and conjured another one, just barely deflecting a bludgeoner. He weathered another three spells, before quickly dropping the shield.

"Exarsil!"

A blinding white light shone from his wand, prompting his attackers to shield their eyes. The one on the left, however, let out a cry of pain, putting his hands over his face. Harry quickly stunned the slow assailant, before casting another shield, deflecting the volley from the three remaining ones. Seeing that the far right assailant would be casting first, Harry dropped the shield.

The attacker in question, pressing his advantage, used the opening to launch a dark green curse at him. Harry quickly conjured another shield, twisting his wand as he incanted. The curved shield sprang into existence and deflected the spell back at the assailant, who didn't react in time to avoid it. He immediately flopped to the ground and began to make vile retching sounds, the mouth of his mask bulging grotesquely.

Seeing an unfamiliar blue curse cast by the leader, Harry moved his shield to deflect it. It struck his shield with a splat, completely covering it with blue paint. Slightly panicked, he bore down and reinforced the shield, leaning into it. As he leaned forward, a chair flew through the magical shield, two of its legs connecting with his chest. The breath was forced from his lungs as he was driven back into the wall, his head bouncing off it.

As he began to raise another shield, the leader's disarmer struck him in the chest, blowing him backwards while ripping Malfoy's wand from his grip. He struck the thin door behind it and broke through it, landing hard on his back, the air knocked from his lungs.

"Potter's down!"

Now outside, gasping for air, Harry tried to get up, but the leader got there first and placed a vicious kick to his ribs. As he tried to curl up, the leader reached down and grabbed the neck of his robes, pulling him upwards. He only had time to blink before the assailant's other fist smashed into his jaw, mashing his lips into his teeth.

"Help me get this little pissant inside!" the leader snarled, turning to Draco and the other masked wizard. Draco's was sweating heavily, his gaze conflicted as he began to move backwards.

"If you get yourself killed, it's not my fault!" Draco exclaimed. "You shouldn't have fought back! Y-y-you deserve it!" he finished, before running back in the direction of Hogwarts.

"Get back here Malfoy!" the leader roared, but the order was ignored. The other remaining attacker did as ordered, taking hold of Harry's robes. As the coppery taste of blood hit his taste buds, he was dragged back, his feet skidding uselessly on the smooth tile, unable to find purchase.

After dragging him away from the door, the leader stomped on Harry's right wrist, pinning it to the ground.

"This lesson has been long overdue, Potter," the leader said, his wand pointed at Harry's prone hand. "Frango osseus!"

The bone-shattering curse struck Harry's hand, pulverizing the three middle fingers with a crunch. He screamed in agony and began to thrash, but the leader merely bore down with his boot, while the other assailant leaned over him and placed his wand beneath his chin.

"My next spell is gonna be a severing curse if you don't sit still," the deep, magically enhanced voice threatened.

With great effort, his hand still screaming, Harry stopped resisting.

"You can't catch the Snith without fingers," the leader said smugly, before cursing his hand again, obliterating the thumb. As Harry screamed again, the one on top of him leaned backwards, laughing hard, his eyes closed in mirth.

Seizing the opportunity, Harry quickly brought his foot up and fired the heel of his boot as hard as he could into the assailant's jaw. It was a perfect strike, breaking the jaw with a dull crack, knocking him out. The leader spun his wand around, but Harry reached up and pulled his wrist down, sending the curse into the floor. Unable to free his wand, he leaned down and tried to punch Harry in the face, but he moved his head slightly, causing the assailant's knuckles to smash against the hard floor. The impact knocked him off balance, allowing Harry to squirm out from under his boot.

The leader tried to cast again, but Harry charged the arm with his shoulder, knocking the curse into the wall, and then launching a kick directly into his nuts. Pressing his advantage, he tackled the older student to the floor, and ripped his wand away.

"You can't -" was all the leader had time for before Harry stunned him. Letting out a sigh of relief, his right hand in agony, he heaved himself upwards, and turned around, to the sight of a wand pointed at his forehead.

Adrian Pucey had light green slime and chunks all over the lower half of his face. Harry had only time to think that perhaps Flint wasn't as feared as he thought before his teammate cast.

The bludgeoner struck him in the nose, breaking it with a dull crack, causing the world to grow blurry. The wand slid from his limp slackened fingers as he tumbled to the floor, barely clinging to consciousness.

"Ennervate!"

He vaguely heard Pucey wake up the leader, who shook his head for a moment before bending down to pick up his wand.

"You're fucking dead, Potter!" the unmistakable voice of Higgs yelled, the charm apparently having worn off.

As the irate prefect pointed his wand down, Flint's words occurred to him.

"And you're still a fucking pussy, Higgs," he replied, a dazed, uncomprehending smile upon his face.

Higgs smiled maliciously, and began to reply, but a sudden crash cut him off. His eyes cut upwards, where they began to bulge in terror. Before Higgs could move, a giant form charged into him, shoulder first, sending him flying.

"What the fuck are ye doing to my Seeker!" Flint roared, dropping down on top of Higgs' prone, facedown form. Not waiting for an answer, he roughly pulled the prefect's arm up and across his back, ripping it out of its socket with a pop, causing the shoulder to bulge grotesquely. Higgs promptly began to sob in pain.

"What kind of a fag needs three people to take down a first year?" Flint demanded, before ripping off the mask, revealing Higgs' blubbering face.

"What did I say about fuckin' with my Seeker?" Flint asked in a quiet, deadly voice that Harry had never heard used before.

"Please, Flint, I-" was all Higgs had time to say before Flint grabbed his head by the hair, and bounced his skull off the tile floor, where it hit with a sickening crack. The prefect could only moan as his head was pulled back and slammed again, harder. Unconscious, blood pouring from his skull, Flint readied for a third strike.

"You're going to kill him!" Pucey's voice screamed from behind Harry.

"I am," Flint calmly said, pounding Higgs' head into the tile one final time. The prefect was completely still, facedown in a pool of spreading blood. With scary agility, Flint jumped up and stared down the younger Slytherin.

"And you, ye traitorous cunt, are next."

Pucey let out a scream of mortal terror, which was followed by heavy footfalls in the opposite direction. Flint immediately chased after him, his expression murderous.

As consciousness left Harry, he mused that he would not want to be Pucey right now.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

No matter how many times he saw it, the black door never failed to inspire terror. It never made a difference that on a conscious level, he perceived that it was indeed a dream.

This time is no different.

Harry went rigid, quieting and slowing every inhalation, trying to make as little noise as possible. Maybe if he was quiet enough, the voice, the flames wouldn't find him. It was a desperate hope, but it was all he had.

As absurd as his plan was, it actually seemed to work. With a minute's time, the ebony door usually would have begun to rattle menacingly, but this time there had been nothing but silence. Were things going to be different this time?

As the minutes passed, he began to think that they might. Maybe he could use the opportunity to figure out more about the room, determine its significance.

Unfortunately, there didn't seem to be much information to discern from the sparsely decorated room. Plain white walls, bookshelves without books, an entire wall without a single feature. Turning to his right, he saw a red spot on the far wall. Moving towards it, he saw that it was a red-handled tack, which pinned a white envelope to the wall, with black lettering upon it.

Bringing his face closer, he read the words aloud.

"Harry James Potter?"

Bewildered, he took down the envelope, pressing the red tack back into the wall. It was definitely muggle in nature, with its eggshell white color and machine folded crispness. It was very light, as if its contents were sparse. Apprehensive, he began to rip it open.

Without warning, a boom reverberated through the room as something slammed into the door with tremendous force. With a yelp, Harry dropped the letter.

"So close to the truth, Harry," the dreaded familiar voice mocked.

As if hit by a sledgehammer, the black door flew open, letting in the ebony flames.

"Soon enough, Harry," the voice promised.

As the flames converged on him, Harry began to scream.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry's first impression upon waking was that his hand was on fire. He tried to shake it, to wave away the flames, but found that he was unable to move his arm. Opening his eyes, he saw that thick leather straps crisscrossed his body. What the hell was going on?

"Let me out!" Harry yelled, thrashing wildly against his bonds.

At his cries, he heard a door thrown open, revealing Madam Pomfrey. With a start, he realized he was within the Hogwarts infirmary. She quickly ran to his side, and began to undo the straps.

"I'm so sorry Mister Potter," the matron said, clearly distressed by Harry's reaction.

"What the hell is this?" Harry demanded. "They attacked me!"

"It was for your own safety," she assured, undoing the last of the straps. "You seemed to be having intense, horrifying dreams, as you were screaming and thrashing. Your hand wasn't going to heal if it kept moving around."

"Why didn't you just use a Dreamless Sleep Potion?" Harry asked, frustrated with his treatment.

The matron looked uncomfortable at the question.

"Well...we did," she awkwardly replied, "but...as unlikely as it seems, it didn't have any effect."

Harry was silent at the news, trying to make sense of it all. Why wouldn't the potion work? How could a dream escape its effects? Shaking his head, Harry looked back at his burning hand, and let out a gasp at its state. His hand looked like it had been deflated, as all on the fingers hung loosely, without any rigidity.

Pomfrey, noting his look of shock, patted his knee reassuringly.

"I know it looks bad, but the damage to the bones was so severe that I had to dissolve them and grow them from scratch. I'm sorry for the pain, but any numbing charms would interfere with calcium reformation."

Harry grimaced at the news.

"My chest hurts too? How bad was I hurt?"

Madam Pomfrey's gaze grew cold.

"Those...cowards hurt you badly, Harry. You have two cracked ribs, three broken fingers, a broken nose and a fractured wrist. However, the worst was the concussion you suffered."

Harry whistled.

"Yeah, I guess they did," he agreed, surprised it had been that bad. Looking past her, he saw the sunlight filtering through the window, which suggested it was Thursday. Which meant...

"Wait, I'm going to be ready for Saturday's match, right?" he asked hopefully.

"Absolutely not," she sternly replied. "You won't be able to grip a broom by Saturday, but more importantly, I will not allow you to play with a concussion."

Harry shook his head in negation.

"I'll be really careful," he promised.

"Quidditch is a dangerous game, Mister Potter," she patiently explained. "If you were to sustain another concussion so shortly after this one, you would run the risk of permanent brain damage."

"Flint is not going to be happy," Harry groaned.

Pomfrey bit her lip slightly at his words, an apprehensive look upon her face.

"Mister Flint has been suspended from Hogwarts."

"What! Why? He was the one who saved me!" he exclaimed. How could they punish the person that saved him?

"Mister Potter, how clear are your memories of what happened after you took the bludgeoner to the head?"

Thinking back, he realized that it was all somewhat hazy. He thinks maybe Flint tackled Higgs, but that's all that he could recall.

"Not much."

Pomfrey nodded.

"I suspected as much. While he did save you, he went too far in defending you. Terrence Higgs barely survived Marcus Flint's attack, and is in critical condition right now."

At her words, a hazy memory surfaced of Flint slamming Higgs' head into the floor. As much as it sucked that he almost died, Harry couldn't summon much sympathy for the prefect.

"Flint gets a little psychotic when angry, but he was protecting me. What about the five students that attacked me?"

"There were only four students involved," Pomfrey replied, shaking her head. "Draco Malfoy was supposed to be involved, but had a change of heart at the last moment and ran into Flint on his way to alert Professor Snape."

Harry was conflicted by the news. While he did owe Malfoy for getting Flint, he was the one who had come up with the plan. Even if he did back out, it was his fault it happened in the first place. The thought of him escaping without any repercussion didn't sit well with him.

"Mister Potter," Pomfrey said, interrupting his thoughts. "Professor Dumbledore asked that I fetch him when you woke up. Unless you need anything else, I'll be back in a minute."

Harry shook his head, prompting the matron to walk off. Looking around, he saw that Higgs was placed in a bed at the opposite end of the infirmary. His entire head was swathed in thick bandaging. Besides him was Pucey, who looked to be sleeping, large splints supporting both legs. On the opposite side was another Slytherin student, maybe a third-year, sleeping, with a dressing wrapped around his chin, which Harry assumed was the one he had kicked in the jaw.

On the whole, it looked like Higgs' entire support team may have been younger students. It did make sense, as the older, wiser Slytherins would have realized it suicidal to attack Flint's Seeker.

Shortly thereafter, Dumbledore entered the infirmary, a concerned look upon his face.

"Good morning, Harry. How are you feelings?"

Harry shrugged.

"My hand hurts a lot, and I'm going to miss Saturday's match, but besides that I guess I'm okay."

"It is unfortunate," the Headmaster admitted, "but necessary. You cannot risk any further injury."

"No thanks to them," he snarled, motioning towards the prone Slytherins.

"Rest assured, Harry," Dumbledore sternly replied, "the four students that participated in the attack will face severe consequences."

"What about Malfoy?" Harry exclaimed, frustrated by his apparent escape from punishment.

The Headmaster sighed deeply.

"While I understand there's no love lost between the two of you, he did save you from even more grievous injury."

Harry suppressed his initial reaction to Dumbledore's statement, and blew out a deep breath instead.

"Sir, Malfoy was the one that planned the attack."

"I am aware of that," Dumbledore said quietly. "Draco made a terrible decision, but he realized his mistake and tried to atone for it."

"Yeah, right," Harry scoffed. "Malfoy probably realized this was his chance to win back the Seeker position, with me and Higgs out of the way."

"That is possible," Dumbledore conceded, "but unlikely. I suggest that you ask him yourself, when Pomfrey releases you from the infirmary. Please understand, Draco will face punishment for his actions, just not to the degree as the students who participated in the attack."

Harry was open to the idea of talking with Malfoy. If he didn't like what he heard, he could always dish out his own payback, which might be satisfying.

Or at the very least, fun.

"What's going to happen to them?" Harry asked, accepting that Malfoy was going to escape serious punishment.

"Terrence Higgs had been stripped of his prefect status, and has been suspended for the rest of the semester. If he is remorseful in his actions, I may allow him to attend Hogwarts next fall, but that remains to be seen."

"What!" Harry exclaimed, incensed. "This guy could have killed me!"

"Terrence made a terrible decision, that is undeniable," Dumbledore said heavily. "However, it is possible that it served as a personal catharsis for him, and turned him away from a darker path. If given a second chance, many people see their mistakes for what they were and change. As I said, if this is not the case, then Terrence will not be permitted back here."

He glared at the Headmaster, still displeased with the decision. If they didn't face stronger punishment, would other students try to hurt him as well?

"Well, I hope no one else tries to attack me, 'cause I'm getting sick of it. The next person that attacks me is spending the rest of the year in St. Mungo's. If you won't send a message, I will."

"I understand that you are frustrated, Harry, but I will not allow this situation to escalate. When two parties become obsessed with achieving their revenge, they often lose perspective on the situation."

Harry said nothing, but the Headmaster was undeterred.

"My judgment is harsher than you realize, Harry. Terrence missing his O.W.L. year will have long-term consequences, as beyond possibly repeating a year, it will be a humbling psychological experience."

Harry still wasn't convinced, but the Headmaster seemed to be entrenched in his position. Besides, Flint had already served out a brand of justice more harsh any Dumbledore ever could have done.

"What about the others?"

"The rest of the students were all younger, more impressionable. They will face one-month suspensions, followed by weekend detentions with Filch for the remainder of the year."

"What about Flint? Are you really suspending him?"

Dumbledore sighed heavily.

"I am. Young Marcus Flint has a history of violence, which began to increase in frequency following his father's unfortunate murder almost two years ago. Terrence Higgs barely survived his attack, the ferocity of which...concerns me. I do not intend for his suspension to be a punishment, but as an opportunity to get him some help."

Harry nodded in agreement. No matter what may have happened to Higgs, he thought Flint had done the right thing, but had just taken it a bit too far.

That left Malfoy as the only loose end. He'd do as Dumbledore suggested, and talk to him. And maybe he'd regret his actions.

But if he didn't?

Harry would swat him like a fly.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Friday night found Harry in his bed, the hangings closed, and a book in front of him. He was having trouble concentrating on it, however, as his thought kept drifting towards the upcoming confrontation.

At about midnight, he heard Malfoy enter the first-year dormitory.

"After tomorrow, everyone's going to wonder why Flint ever chose Potter as Seeker," Draco's voice boasted as he entered the room.

Taking a deep breath, Harry drew aside the green hanging of his bed and addressed the blond boy.

"It's good to see you're confident."

"I'm going to make sure Slytherin crushes Ravenclaw's pathetic team," Malfoy claimed.

Harry smirked slightly.

"Hopefully. Can we talk outside for a minute?"

"Maybe Sunday. We'll see. I've got a big game tomorrow, in case you haven't heard, and I'm sure I'll be celebrating Slytherin's victory all day Saturday."

Sighing mentally, Harry reminded himself to stay civil.

"I've been protecting you so far," Harry lied, "but if you won't even talk to me, I'm going to tell Dumbledore what really happened."

Malfoy scoffed at his claim.

"Yeah, right, there's no way you'd stick your neck out for me."

He raised a single eyebrow at Malfoy's deduction.

"Is this really a conversation you want to have in front of everyone?"

"Fine, we'll have your stupid talk," Draco conceded with a roll of his eyes, walking back toward the Common Room. Harry followed him as he took a seat at one of them high-backed chairs, away from any other students.

"What do you really want, Potter?" he asked impatiently once Harry had sat down in a nearby chair.

"You know, you're pretty smart when you're not trying to be an annoying wanker."

"Get to the fucking point, or I'm going to bed," Draco demanded, crossing his arms.

"Calm down, Malfoy," Harry urged with a slight chuckle. "Who really thought up the plan, you or Higgs?"

"I thought of everything, Higgs just wanted in when he found out about it."

"Really? How were you able to recruit people for it? You're just a first year."

"What can I say? The Malfoy name commands respect," Draco said with a malevolent smile. "Besides, there's more than enough Slytherins after your blood that finding help wasn't hard."

Harry shrugged, conceding the point. It was no secret that most of the Slytherins didn't like him.

"You know, you left pretty easily once Higgs said they weren't using your plan. Stinging hexes, was it? Getting a little revenge for the Quiddich tryouts?"

Malfoy grew red at the claim.

"Higgs just wanted all the glory for himself!"

"Glory?" Harry asked, incredulously.

"Yeah, glory," Draco confirmed. "You're just Dumbledore's golden boy, aren't you? He makes special rules for you, all the teachers

love you, no one does anything when you attack other students, and you're a Quidditch star. You don't deserve any of this; you stole the Seeker position from me. Higgs should have crippled you while he had the chance!"

His ears perked up at Draco's final statement. Had that been Higgs' goal the entire time? Did Higgs mention it, but Draco hadn't taken him seriously? And did this blond poof just admit to wanting to hurt him?

"Are you sure you don't belong in Gryffindor?" Harry asked, his voice filled with anger. "You have to be the least cunning person I've ever met. Did you really think I was going to let this go?"

Draco's eyes widened at his abrupt tonal shift, as if he had begun to realize that he had bitten off more than he could chew. Feeling himself begin to lose control, Harry bore down mentally, hiding the torrent of flames which had been coursing through his mind.

"Snape doesn't really seem to love me," Harry remarked, addressing Malfoy's original clam. "Oh, and you're totally bollocks at Quidditch, which is probably why I won," he added, almost as an afterthought. "I can't wait to see Ravenclaw mop the floor with you tomorrow."

"Fuck you Potter," Draco snarled, before the red in his face faded, as if coming to a realization.

"But, none of that matters anymore," he continued, regaining some of his composure. "I'm now the Seeker, and I got away with planning that attack with only a few detentions with Filch. I wish you'd gotten hurt worse, but oh well. I win, Potter."

"Do you really want a war with me, Malfoy?" Harry asked in a cold tone. "I don't think you do."

Draco appeared to be taken aback slightly by Harry's vehemence, before getting up, shaking his head.

"You can't win a war against me, Potter," Draco replied, before going back to his dormitory.

Long after the Malfoy heir had left, Harry sat, deep in thought. It appeared that Draco, convinced that he had escaped serious

punishment, wanted to gloat about his victory. He was proud of it, so probably hadn't lied a great deal.

If word got out that Harry wasn't going to do anything to the student that planned the attack, it might become open season on him. He did have a lot of enemies within Slytherin, and some of them were admittedly quite smart. Draco's success might convince them to try, which is something Harry didn't want.

No, Draco was going to have to pay. Maybe things would have been different if the pureblood had been somewhat remorseful for his actions, but that wasn't the case. Summoning Flint had been an opportunity to get what he really wanted, nothing else.

With a smile, Harry began to lay his plans.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

As Harry had predicted, Saturday's Quidditch match was a complete slaughter. Minus their Seeker and two of their starting Chasers, Slytherin had absolutely no chance. Draco looked lost up in the air, like a flying muggle compared to Ravenclaw's young Seeker, Cho Chang. Within twenty minutes, Chang snatched the Snitch out from beneath Malfoy's nose, ending the match in a 310 – 40 victory for Ravenclaw.

The next week was a very difficult one for the Malfoy heir. Following the match, in a Common Room packed with sullen students, Harry loudly pointed out how many times Draco had missed the Snitch, the crowning moment coming when he had recoiled from a Bludger in fear, eyes closed, allowing the Snitch to fly right by. Draco did try to defend himself, but any retort was swiftly met with a comment pointing out how at least he hadn't single-handedly ruined Slytherin's chances for the Quidditch Cup. The claim wasn't exactly true, but it never failed to embarrass Malfoy, which more than made up for its lack of veracity.

While Harry had nothing more to say on the subject after the first day, his fellow Slytherin housemates more than compensated with their cruelty. With none of Harry's attackers still currently at Hogwarts, the Slytherins made the Malfoy heir their scapegoat. For the first time, Draco discovered what it was like to be a pariah. Possessions were stolen, he was often tripped or cursed between

classes, sometimes at the same time, and his usually stellar Potions work took a dive from people throwing things into his cauldron. The Gryffindors even got into the act, breaking into loud applause whenever they saw him, since his terrible performance had allowed Gryffindor back into Quidditch Cup contention.

All told, Harry found it to be a wonderful week. Even better was that the worst had yet to come for the young aristocrat.

One week removed from Slytherin's crushing defeat, Harry spent all day in the Common Room, one eye watching Malfoy, the other upon his open book. To his frustration, while Malfoy came and went throughout the afternoon, it was always accompanied by at least one member of his entourage.

Just when Harry was about to give up, conceding that his plan needed some refinement, Malfoy shook his head and threw down his quill, before leaving the Common Room, on his own. Relieved, he followed. Walking by where the blond boy had been sitting, it became clear that he had been working on a Potions essay.

Once outside, he ducked into a nearby alcove. Withdrawing his wand, he cast a silencing charm on each of his feet, before donning his father's invisibility cloak. Hidden from view, he ran towards the Potions classroom, hoping to confirm that it was indeed Draco's destination. Turning the corner, Harry observed that he was heading straight for the Potions classroom. Satisfied, he nestled himself into an alcove, and waited.

Not more than five minutes later, Draco emerged from the Potions classroom, a smug smile upon his face. He held his breath while Draco passed by him, but the blond boy noticed nothing wrong. Scanning the hallway, he saw that it was clear. It was time.

Taking a deep breath, he withdrew his wand and flung a stunner, using a whispered incantation. The crimson spell hit Draco in the back, felling him like a stone before he realized anything was wrong. He quickly ran over, and dragged the unconscious body into a nearby classroom, locking the door behind him.

Harry propped the stunned body up in a chair, before pointing his wand at him.

"Capillus colos!" Harry yelled, concentrating fiercely. As soon as the white spell struck Draco, his blond hair, starting at the root, began to darken. To his delight, within seconds, the blond locks had been turned black.

Gleefully, he reached into his robes and withdrew an inkwell, filled with a specialized base heartily recommended by the Weasley twins. Taking out a quill, he carefully drew a lightning bolt upon his forehead. Stepping back, he couldn't help but laugh.

The aristocrat's pale, slightly petulant facial features remained, but a bit of permanent ink and black hair made a world of difference. Giggling uncontrollably, he went to the doorway, and undid the stunner. Before Malfoy could regain his surrounding, he was off, sprinting down the hall.

Upon arriving at the Common Room, he took off the cloak, hiding it in his robes and undid the charms upon his feet. Once inside, he settled back into the chair he had spent most of the day in, which just happened to have a spectacular view of the door. He hoped that Draco wouldn't notice anything wrong, and would come to the Common Room as opposed to Snape or Pomfrey.

Five minutes later, Malfoy entered through the door, an angry look on his face. The anger quickly turned to apprehension upon the few laughs that accompanied his arrival.

"Why are you dressed like Potter?" Nott loudly asked, "Halloween was three months ago."

Malfoy's mouth opened in horror as the entire Common Room looked up at Nott's comment, and begin to laugh uproariously. Draco, bright red with embarrassment, immediately sprinted towards the first-year dormitory.

"I always knew you were a fan, deep down!" Harry yelled at Malfoy's retreating form, causing the roar of laughter to increase in volume. All around, students were falling from chairs, slapping their knees as tears of laughter leaked from their eyes.

Draco sent him one final scathing look before entering the first-year room and slamming the door.

Satisfied, Harry leaned back in his chair, the first part of his plan a success.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Walking back from the latest extra Defense class, Harry began to get unnerved by the conspiratorial whispers his two friends were exchanging, which he couldn't really make out. Halfway back to the Common Room, both Millicent and Tracey slowed down, malevolent smiles upon their faces.

Nothing good was going to come of this, he could tell.

"So, Harry," Millicent began, a sly edge to her voice. "I've noticed that ever since the start of semester, you've always partnered with Padma. Thinking of making her your valentine?"

Harry started to form a denial, but Tracey beat him to the punch.

"Hey Millie," Tracey said while smiling maliciously, "should we put in a good word to Padma for our good friend Harry?"

He quickly adopted a perplexed expression upon his face.

"I don't really know what you're talking about," he answered. "She makes a really good partner, since she's smart and knows her stuff."

Millicent shrugged.

"So I guess it must be a coincidence she's the best-looking girl in the class."

"Outside Slytherin, that is," Tracey lightly chastised.

"Well, comparing any girl to you and me would just be unfair, so I don't count us," Millicent replied with a giggle. Tracey nodded, accepting her friend's amendment.

"Okay, she might be kinda nice to look at as well," Harry admitted, a smile playing at the corner of his mouth. "Would you really put in a good word for me?"

"Of course we would!" Millicent enthusiastically agreed, "especially with Valentine's Day right around the corner."

"Think of it, Harry, there'd be no better time to declare your undying love for her!" Tracey encouraged.

Harry pretended to think for a moment, before raising his fist in triumph.

"You know, that's a great idea! We could all do it together, during Valentine's Day breakfast!"

Tracey snorted at his suggestion.

"Sorry, but you're the only one here with a crush."

Harry playfully batted at Tracey's shoulder.

"Hey, it's fine, you two don't have to hide your love anymore, you can openly declare your undying love for Crabbe and Goyle. Like you said, we'll all do it at the same time!"

Tracey immediately began to make retching noises, while Millicent mimed taking a timeout.

"Whoa, you crossed the line there," Millicent said with a shudder.

"Besides," Tracey added, "they seem to have a pretty magical thing going on with Malfoy."

As they burst into laughter, Harry mused that he now knew what shape his nightmares would take for the next few weeks. All things considered, he'd probably take the black flames any day.

"Well, it seems that the Slytherins are certainly in fine spirits today!" an unseen, but slightly familiar voice exclaimed, startling the three students. Tracey immediately drew her wand, and spun around.

"Who's there?" she demanded, blue eyes cold.

"The little one is feisty, isn't she, brother?" a second voice asked, very similar to the first.

"Tracey, it's all right," Harry assured, trying not to laugh, before raising his voice. "You know, it would have been more creepy if you two had disguised your voices."

"I told you that we forgot something, Fred."

"We don't want to give the ickie first-years nightmares, do we?"

"No, of course not, that would spoil next month's surprise. Should we reveal ourselves?"

"Perhaps we should make our Slytherin brethren wait another twenty minutes, especially since Percy is headed in their direction. Perhaps they want to have an intellectual conversation?"

Harry began wildly shaking his head in denial, all while laughing.

"I'll do anything: Throw the next Slytherin match, dye my hair red and gold, actually laugh at your terrible jokes; anything to avoid Percy."

"Hey, Fred," George replied brightly, "we've finally found someone that will laugh at our jokes!"

"Then what are you waiting for, brother? Let them in quick before they change their minds!"

Without warning, a large statue of a regal-looking wizard in spectacles slid aside, revealing a darkened fissure in the wall, barely large enough to admit one person at a time.

"There's no way I'm going in there," Tracey established, shaking her head.

"Come on," one of the twins promptly replied, "it's dark and cramped. Don't you snakes really like that type of thing?"

"Well, in that case, how could we resist?" Millicent sarcastically remarked, before entering the fissure, her lit wand held aloft. Tracey, still uncomfortable, just viewed the hole in the masonry distrustfully.

"Are these two really alright?" she asked, prompting Harry to smile.

"No, they both kinda suck, but they're not going to hurt us. You'll be fine, Tracey."

Grimacing at his words, she entered the fissure, closely followed by Harry. Upon entering, the statue slid back into place.

"Welcome to one of the dungeon's many secrets," one of the Weasleys said. "I'm Fred, the brains behind the Weasley twins," he claimed, stretching out his hand to Millicent, who shook it hesitantly.

"I'm sorry about my deluded brother," George said, elbowing his sibling out of the way, and taking Millicent's hand. "He always thinks that if he can convince people he's not an idiot, it will come true."

"And some day it's going to work!" Fred claimed.

Harry laughed as he looked around. It looked the size of a normal room, as if it had been walled off.

"You know, I thought there'd be tons of passages between the dungeons, but I haven't been able to find many."

"Despite what 'Hogwarts, a History' might have to say, we think that the lower levels of Hogwarts might have been a prison originally," George explained. "It looks like the Founders sealed most of it off."

"Wow," Harry replied, surprised. "You guys actually read that book?"

"Well, we may not have actually 'read' it," George admitted.

"Although we may have asked a certain first-year muggleborn witch about the finer details regarding the dungeons," Fred finished.

"She probably was able to do it from memory, too," Tracey remarked with a snort.

"Ah-ha!" Fred exclaimed, "it would appear that young Hermione has competition for the affections of Hogwarts' resident Dark Lord."

Tracey laughed derisively at the conclusion, and opened her mouth to reply, but Fred silenced her with a single finger to his lips, and motioned for them to follow. He led them up a stone ladder, at the top of which was what looked like a small storage area. Fred pointed

to a spot in the middle of the floor, where a small aperture provided a bird-eye's view of the corridor.

"For reasons that shall remain secret," George whispered, "we've found out that our dearest brother Percy is on his way."

"We liked what you did to Malfoy so much," Fred continued, "that we figured we'd provide our own brother with a new hair color. Would you care to do the honors?"

Harry considered it, as it would be pretty funny, but he felt fortunate to have escaped blame for Malfoy's cosmetic change. If Percy caught him, he might get blamed for Malfoy as well, which would put his plan in jeopardy.

"No thanks, if Percy found out it was me, his head might explode."

"What's the downside?" Fred asked with a shrug, before pointing his wand down the hole. A minute later, Percy appeared, in the middle of one of his prefect rounds. Smiling malevolently, Fred whispered the incantation, striking Percy in the head.

The prefect immediately spun around, his face red as his hair shifted to a hideous electric blue, apparently feeling the magic wash over him.

"Where are you, Potter?"

"Potter?" George mouthed, his face confused.

"You can't do this to a prefect, Potter! You're going to pay for this!"

The irate prefect stormed around the hallway for a few minutes, inspecting every inch of it, but was unable to find anything suspicious. After his tenth pass he stomped off, muttering under his breath.

"Um, Fred, why is our dear brother so fixated on Harry?" George asked, clearly confused by Percy's actions.

"I don't know, but it appears Percy has gotten a bit obsessed," Fred replied.

"How disappointing," Harry said, shaking his head. "If I knew Percy was just going to blame me anyway, I would have just cursed him."

The group chuckled at his comment.

"You know, Harry, when you first asked us about the hair-coloring charm I had my doubts, but it looks like you really know what you're doing."

Harry bowed low at George's praise.

"Thank you, thank you."

"In all seriousness though," George began, his expression losing its good cheer, "I've heard that Draco is looking to strike back at you, hard, so watch your back."

This wasn't exactly news, as this was all part of his plans. The story of Draco's unfortunate wardrobe malfunction had become legend around the school. In the fallout, the blond boy had kept his head low, rarely seen outside of class and mealtimes. As he had anticipated, the few times he had seen Draco, dislike and a thirst for revenge consumed his features.

Oddly enough, this was good. He could never have gotten away with attacking Draco unprovoked. However, if he was acting in self-defense, it was an entirely different matter. Draco, having been embarrassed in front of the entire house, would want to return the favor. And then Harry would strike.

"That's exactly what I want," Harry replied with a slightly evil smile.

Both Fred and George whistled.

"I do believe that we should watch our backs around our new Dark Lord," Fred observed.

"I wouldn't worry about it," Harry said with a grin. "You've got to do something pretty bad to end up on my shit list."

"Ah, our Dark Lord is both cruel and just, but I agree," Fred remarked. "What Draco did was unforgivable. When someone hurts

you that badly, you've got no choice but to strike back as hard as you can."

"So Harry," Tracey began, "when are you going to tell us what you have planned?"

"I don't want to ruin the surprise."

"It better be good," Millicent demanded, pointing at him in a vaguely threatening manner.

"It's going to be better than good," Harry replied with an evil smile.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

March 20, 1992

With a dexterity born from long hours within Nicolas' potions laboratory, Harry neatly bisected the skinned shrivelfig root, creating two pieces of equal size. He continued to split the root down, until he had a pile of equally sized pieces.

"Does this really make that much of a difference?" Tracey wondered. "If it really mattered so much, wouldn't it be part of the instructions?"

"Nope," Harry replied while sweeping the pieces into the cauldron. "Our potions books are written so that anyone can do it. It won't be perfect, but it will do the job."

Upon the root sinking into his cauldron, the dark color of the fledgling Belly-Ache Potion shifted to a light pink. Pure textbook perfection.

"If we had used different sized pieces, there might be darker spots of pink in the potion. Of course, Snape didn't tell us this, I learned it from Nicolas. Think Snape doesn't tell us stuff on purpose just so he can yell at us?"

Tracey shook her head slowly, a small smile upon her face.

"You know, when I learn stuff like this, it almost makes it worth all the low grades and dirty looks I get for being your partner."

Chuckling, Harry bottled up two samples of the pink potion into clear flasks, and put their names on it. He chose not to vanish the rest of the potion, as it was common for his potion samples to have "accidents" after being placed on Snape's desk. Their work done, they leaned back in their chairs, surveying the rest of the class.

"Tracey," Harry whispered, "have you noticed anything different about Malfoy today?"

"Yeah, I have," she admitted. "He seems kinda far away today, like his heart hasn't been in his insults today. And just look at his potion."

Discreetly looking to the side, he observed that Malfoy, typically a talented Potions student, was doing poorly today, his cauldron a giant mass of purple gelatin.

"Yeah, something's definitely wrong."

"Do you think...today is the day?" she hesitantly asked.

"Yeah, I do."

"Malfoy has had a month to plan his revenge," Tracey said, her voice earnest. "No matter how much we make fun of him, he's not stupid. He's not going to try something unless he thinks it's going to work. You need our help, Harry."

He shook his head in denial.

"After I humiliate Malfoy, I'm going to be facing a lot of trouble from the Board of Governors. I have enough people on my side to avoid getting suspended, but Dumbledore might not be able to save you as well."

"I don't like this at all," Tracey said, looking very displeased, "not one bit. Neither does Millie."

"I know," he acknowledged, "but I've thought it out, and this is really the only way it can work."

"Well," she said with a sigh, "I really hope you've got a good plan then."

The rest of the class passed in uncomfortable silence, before Snape called Harry to his desk, while dismissing the rest of the class. His friends lingered, which didn't seem to please Snape.

"Class dismissed," the Potions Master reiterated, his voice cold. "Unless the rest of you wish to clean my storeroom for the next month, I suggest you leave immediately."

Harry gave a slight nod, prompting his friends to leave, although they didn't look happy about it. He shared their opinion, as he could think of many other things he'd rather be doing.

As his friends left, Snape took his flask full of Belly-Ache Potion and began to turn it over in his hands, examining it thoroughly. After a long inspection, at which Harry began to grow uncomfortable with just standing in silence, the professor placed the flask back on his desk.

"Your Belly-Ache Potion is perfect," Snape remarked, his face expressionless.

"Oh, um, thank you sir," Harry said awkwardly, truly surprised by the praise.

"Then again, only a complete idiots would have a famed alchemist for a guardian and not show any skill at Potions," Snape observed, a cruel smirk on his face.

Harry said nothing, but found himself amused that Snape had just admitted he wasn't a complete idiot.

"No, Potter, you are not a complete idiot," Snape said, as if reading his mind, "but you are just as big-headed and arrogant as your father. You see yourself as above the rules, but if it were up to me, I would have expelled you long ago."

Harry remained motionless, but had to fight the urge to roll his eyes. If Snape could have expelled him before the Sorting, he would have.

"If you ever harm one of my students again," the professor threatened, "mark my words, I will make sure you are expelled, and I will have the full support of the Board of Governors."

"Everything I did against those older Slytherins was self-defense," Harry claimed, playing dumb.

"You know what I'm talking about!" Snape snarled, slamming his fist against the desk in frustration.

"No, I don't," Harry lied, crossing his arms as he did so.

"I know you attacked Draco," the professor accused, his expression livid.

"Draco didn't really seem injured," he remarked, struggling to keep a straight face.

Snape's right eye twitched at his comments, and his fingers curled, as if they were itching to wrap themselves around his throat.

"I may not be able to prove it," he admitted, "but everyone knows it was you that embarrassed Draco. Attack him again, and you will be expelled. Now get out of my classroom, Potter, and remember what I said."

Harry gladly did so.

The rest of the day, he avoided the Slytherin Common Room, fairly certain that Draco's payback was going to occur there, so that he could prove his superiority in front of the entire House. After classes finished for the day, he went up to the library to finish up some work, not coming back down until dinner time. The longer Malfoy had to wait, the more the anticipation would eat at him, making him more prone to mistakes.

During dinner he noticed that most of Slytherin looked tense, as if they were expecting some big event to occur. Whatever Malfoy had in mind, it was definitely happening tonight, and he was planning for a large audience.

Harry and his friends took their time during dinner, staying in the Great Hall until it was almost empty. As Harry finished dinner, and prepared to leave, Tracey grabbed him by the wrist.

"We're not going to let you do this," she threatened, Millicent nodding in agreement. "We are going to help you."

"No you aren't," Harry countered, shaking his head. "I have to do this on my own."

"Really?" Tracey mocked. "How are you going to stop us from helping? Stun us both?"

Harry let out a frustrated breath while thinking furiously. After a few seconds, he conceded defeat, and handed Millicent his book bag.

"If anyone asks, I left this in the Great Hall, and you two offered to go get it, since I wasn't feeling well after dinner. Come down in two minutes. If I'm losing, you can jump in, but if I'm winning, let me finish it."

The two girls agreed to his conditions, before wishing him luck as he exited the Great Hall. Walking through the darkened hallways, he went over the plan in his head. It involved huge risk on his behalf...but weren't the simplest plans usually the best?

As Harry approached the Common Room door, he hoped he had made the right decision.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Author Notes:

Right on schedule. Two more chapters left in Harry's first year, the first of which should be arriving within a week or two.

Any comments, suggestions or criticisms would be deeply appreciated, and inspire me to write as opposed to playing video games. Even a quick "I liked it," or, "it sucked" will suffice. I'll make an effort to answer every review I get.

Thanks to my co-conspirators, darklordmike and mira mirth for their valuable assistance with plotting, characterization and continuity.

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Fourteenth Movement: Divided Thoughts

March 20, 1992

Standing before the door to the Slytherin Common Room, Harry let out a small smile. If his friends had any inkling what his plan was they would have been mortified, but it was important that his counter-attack at least looked unplanned.

"Bloodlines."

The password given, the stone section of wall slid down, admitting entrance. He took one final breath before stepping through, hoping he hadn't underestimated his opponent.

Draco Malfoy was standing directly in front of him, about fifteen feet away, his wand out and clasped tightly. At his entrance, the blond boy grinned wide, a show of complete confidence.

"It's time to show the rest of Slytherin what a fraud you are, Potter!" Draco gleefully exclaimed.

It was no understatement. Black robes with green crests lined the entire perimeter of the room, like Romans watching a gladiatorial battle. As expected, Draco had wanted to make a spectacle of his fight.

Playing to the crowd, Harry shook his head mournfully.

"Draco, what did I do to piss off my number one fan?" he asked, causing a titter to run through the gathered spectators. The blond reddened slightly at the reaction, and raised his wand, aware that control of the situation was beginning to slip away.

"Petrificus totalus!"

Warily, wondering what the wrinkle was going to be, Harry threw up a curved shield and deflected the curse back. The curse merely glanced off Draco's shoulder.

"Is that the best you can do?" he mocked, launching a slicing curse, which Harry deflected back, aiming for his legs. Once again, it

bounced off, like it was hitting a shield, leading him to quickly conclude Draco must have been using a shield amulet, or something.

"What a nice stalemate we have going," he said jovially, hoping to distract the blond boy. The Malfoy heir knew his shields were good, so there had to be another wrinkle.

Draco chose not to answer, and readied his wand again.

"Celatus frango!"

Harry threw up another shield, wary of the unknown grey curse. It struck his shield with a bright discharge, shattering it. The impact drove him back slightly, barely giving him time to dance away from Draco's follow-up bludgeoner.

"You can't shield everything, Potter!" the blond gleefully yelled, before casting another slicer. This was all Draco had up his sleeve?

Grinning, Harry dodged the first curse, and charged in a zigzag pattern. His confidence clearly fading, Draco quickly cast a body-bind, which Harry dove under, landing at his feet. Draco, his eyes wide, went to cast again, but Harry leapt to his feet, Draco's expensive robes in hand. With one quick movement, he pulled the robes over Draco's head, trapping his arm next to his head.

The blond boy barely had time to let out a cry of outrage before Harry pushed him as hard as could, into the low table behind him. His enemy tumbled backwards, ass over teakettle, and landed hard on the stone floor, tangled and blinded within his robes.

Beneath his robes, against Draco's white button-up shirt was a silver pendant with a red stone set into it. Harry tore it from his neck, and placed it in his pocket. Draco let out a yell of rage as he felt the chain break. With a mighty thrash, he freed himself from his robes and jumped up, wand pointed at Harry, a curse on his lips. Before he could complete it, however, Harry's disarmers caught him in the chest, wrenching the wand from his grasp and blowing him backwards. Draco's snarl turned to a grimace when his exposed back crashed into the corner of an oak end-table.

"So, am I still a fraud?" Harry taunted as his enemy thrashed on the ground, gasping in pain.

"Fuck you!" he replied defiantly.

Harry promptly withdrew his wand and hit Draco with four successive stinging hexes, bringing a cry from him.

"Wasn't that your plan, Draco? To hit me with a bunch of stinging hexes?"

Ignoring him, the Malfoy heir began to push himself up. Concentrating hard, he cast an overpowered stinger at Draco's hand. The boy let out a yell as he raised his hand, red welts immediately appearing on it. All thoughts of getting up forgotten, he flopped back onto the floor, holding his hand.

Harry immediately delivered a kick to Draco's side, knocking him onto his back, before planting a boot onto the middle of his chest.

"I'm tired of looking over my shoulder," he stated. "You wanted an audience, well, you've got one now. You're going to promise to leave me alone for the rest of the term."

Draco wildly threw his head from side to side in denial. Pushing aside any moral objections, he launched another stinger, hitting him in the eye. Draco screamed in pain as the hex hit, rupturing the blood vessels in his eye.

"You can end this right now, Draco," Harry reasoned, pushing down with his boot to still the thrashing boy.

"Fine!" Draco yelled, tears of frustration leaking from his eyes.

"Fine what?"

"I'll leave you alone for the rest of the term!" Draco spat, his face contorted with pain and rage.

"Now our entire House knows," Harry retorted. "You go back on this, you're the fucking fraud."

Satisfied, he began to raise his foot.

"Potter!" a familiar voice snarled. "Back away from Draco! Now!"

Lifting his foot, he turned to see the livid face of his least favorite professor.

"Fuck," Harry said to himself with a sigh as Snape approached.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

"As you can see, Potter clearly should be punished," Snape concluded, nostrils flared with rage. The Potions Master had just explained what he had found upon entering the Slytherin Common Room, and clearly expected the Headmaster to reprimand Harry in some fashion.

Snape's explanation finished, Dumbledore focused his gaze upon Harry. His expression was austere, which did was not encouraging.

"Is what Professor Snape described accurate?"

He immediately shook his head in denial.

"You lying little-"

"That will be enough, Severus," Dumbledore decreed, cutting off the livid, sallow-faced man. "Please Harry, continue."

Beneath the angry stare of his Head of House, he did so.

"I don't think I should be expelled, sir," Harry said nervously. "Professor Snape only saw the end of it, but what he did see was correct."

Dumbledore nodded slightly at his correction.

"I see. Would you indulge us regarding what happened before Professor Snape entered the Common Room?"

"Why are we listening to this brat?" Snape demanded, pointing a slightly shaking finger at him. "How many students does Potter have to attack until he gets punished?"

"Harry has the right to defend his actions," Dumbledore calmly explained.

"Potter is twisting this school to his whims," Snape shot back, shaking his head, "and we are enabling his arrogance. If we-"

"That's enough," Dumbledore said sharply, cutting him off. Snape really looked like he wanted to say more, but chose to keep his mouth shut.

"If you are having trouble restraining yourself," the Headmaster continued, "perhaps you should go elsewhere until this meeting concludes."

Snape sneered at the suggestion.

"If you insist. Perhaps I'll go check on Draco, to see how he's recovering from his attack," he spat, before storming out in a flurry of black robes, slamming the door on his way out.

As the echo faded, the Headmaster let out a loud sigh. Taking off his glasses, he closed his eyes and began to massage his temples, his long fingers moving in soft circles.

"Please excuse Severus," he said without opening his eyes. "He can be quite protective of his favorite students."

"He doesn't need an excuse to try to get me expelled," Harry said with a shrug.

"No, I suppose not," the Headmaster replied, opening his eyes. "What happened tonight, Harry?"

Wary of what the reaction might be, Harry did so, starting with his entrance to the Common Room. Dumbledore listened without comment, even after describing how he forced Draco into the agreement.

"Did you have any idea that there was going to be an attack?" the Headmaster quietly asked following his account. With a sinking feeling, Harry began to feel that his revenge hadn't as covert as he had hoped. Afraid that lying would just make things worse, he answered honestly.

"I did, sir."

"Why did you think there was going to be an attack?"

"Draco blamed me for a prank that happened a month ago," he answered, groaning internally.

"I had heard something about that. Did you have any part in it?"

"Yeah, I did," he admitted, feeling like an animal in a trap.

"There are a concerning amount of coincidences at play here," Dumbledore stated as he leaned forward, his gaze heavy. Harry faltered at the state, and put his head down.

"Please, Harry," Dumbledore began with a sigh, "why did you goad Draco into attacking you?"

"Because you didn't punish him," Harry replied. "It was like it didn't matter he almost got me killed. If I didn't make things even, the other Slytherins would think I was weak, and wouldn't think twice about attacking me."

"We've been through this before," the Headmaster stated. "As much as you do not care for Draco, he did save you."

"Yeah, and I listened to you, sir. I tried talking to Malfoy, and he said it was only an opportunity to get the Seeker position. I never told you this, but during the attack, Draco said that everything that was happening was my fault, and I deserved it. After, he said he only wished I was hurt more. How could I just sit back and do nothing? I knew he was telling other people about the attack, and how he got away with only a few detentions. Word was getting around, and I had to put an end to it."

Dumbledore sighed while rubbing his eyes slightly.

"Your dislike of Draco is blinding you to the truth, Harry. He panicked during the attack, and was horrified by what he had done. Much like you care about your image within Slytherin, Draco worried for his. Though he may not have liked you, he didn't want to see you seriously hurt."

"When I talked to him, there was no one else around!" Harry exclaimed, not wanting to believe the Headmaster's words. "Why lie then?"

"He would have seen it as a sign of weakness to show any regret, Harry. Also, Draco had no idea what you would have done with the information. For all he knew, you could have used any admission to further defame him."

"I wouldn't have done that though!"

Dumbledore sighed.

"Harry, what reason did Draco have to trust you? You certainly are mistrustful of him, and make no secret of this. Wouldn't you expect this to be mirrored in a rival?"

As much as he had fought it, Harry could no longer deny the Headmaster's logic. Seeing the situation in a new light, unease began to grow within him as he began to fully comprehend the impact of his actions.

"I've made a real mess of things, haven't I?"

"Indeed you have," Dumbledore replied sagely, "but it is vital that you have recognized your mistake."

"Revenge never really works out, does it?"

"Revenge has never solved anything," he replied, shaking his head sadly.

"What should I do?" Harry asked, feeling weary and frustrated from the day's burdens. "What's going to happen now?"

Dumbledore sighed deeply.

"Unfortunately, the Ministry's reach extends into Hogwarts. The Hogwarts Board of Governors has the right to hold disciplinary hearings for students who violate wizarding law, but after their first offense. Following the locker room incident, they wished to interview you, but I was able to stall them, since officially, that was the first time you violated wizarding law."

"It was self-defense!"

"I am aware of that," Dumbledore calmly stated, "but it was enough to satisfy the Ministry's guidelines. Keep in mind, Harry, that this is a law which is rarely ever used. No, as you are well aware, the Ministry has taken a special interest in you, and I have blocked all of their other attempts to meet with you."

Harry was glad that Dumbledore had been helping him all along, but it was still frustrating to know that he was going to have to explain himself before a board of Ministry employees, all of whom probably disliked him.

"What's going to happen to me?"

"Absolutely nothing," Dumbledore said with a light smile, his eyes twinkling. "The Ministry was so eager to assert their own rules over the school, that they neglected to realize that they are bound by their own legislation. There is indeed a self-defense clause in Wizarding law."

"Isn't Lucius Malfoy on the board?" Harry asked, having no wish to run into the man who almost caused his death.

"He is, and since his son is involved, will probably be looking to punish you, but his case isn't strong enough."

"Well, thanks for everything, sir," Harry replied, feeling slightly better about everything.

"I am not finished," Dumbledore said, shaking his head slightly. "Your actions were absolutely unacceptable."

"I had to do it," Harry disagreed. "If I didn't force Draco into making a promise in front of the rest of Slytherin, he would have kept trying to attack me."

"No," Dumbledore promptly replied, his voice cold. "What you did, Harry, was torture another student, which is never acceptable."

Harry didn't buy the Headmaster's claim at all, since there would have been no other way to make Draco promise to leave him alone.

"I disagree, sir. I did what I had to do. Besides, what's Draco's punishment! He cast the first spell!"

Dumbledore looked less than pleased with his defiance.

"We are talking about you now, Harry, but since you asked, once Draco is released from the infirmary, he faces three months of detention with Professor McGonagall."

"But he won't have to face the Board, will he?"

Dumbledore regarded him silently following the question, making a steeple with his fingers, before sighing deeply.

"No, he won't. The Board needs a majority vote to go before a disciplinary board. Lucius has too many friends for it to go that far."

"So what happens now?"

"Well, I had originally planned on having you serve detention with Professor Snape twice a week for the next three months, but perhaps that is unfitting."

"I think it is, sir," Harry added, shocked that the Headmaster had even considered such a severe punishment. Really, hadn't Dumbledore agreed to protect him while he was at Hogwarts?

"Then let us make a bargain. My main concern in this situation is its potential for escalation. Therefore, if you make a concerted effort to reconcile with Draco, putting an end to any open hostility, then I will reduce your time detentions by two months."

Apologize to Mafloy, or spend less time with Snape. Fuck.

"But sir, I don't really think Draco is going to listen to anything I say," Harry pointed out.

"Indeed, why would he," Dumbledore agreed. "You will have to work hard to put an end to any hostilities, as well as to get him to listen to you, but I would think that reducing your punishment to a mere third of its original duration would be worth the effort."

"What would you do?" Harry asked, struggling to keep the frustration out of his voice. Did Dumbledore think that he was a miracle worker?

"I leave that to you, Harry," Dumbledore calmly stated, "but I believe that there is nothing more powerful than a symbol of good will."

Harry was tempted to rant about how helpful of a suggestion that was, but decided it wouldn't do any good. This was probably the best deal that he was going to get from Dumbledore. And, he had to admit, from the start he had known it was a huge risk to take his revenge on Malfoy. Fuck it; it would work as a good reminder to plan more carefully next time.

Besides, if he reconciled with Draco, maybe next year would be peaceful as well.

"Okay, I'll do my best, sir," Harry replied.

"I am pleased to hear that," the Headmaster stated. "If you make an honest effort to reconcile with Draco, and believe me, I will know whether this happens or not, I will reduce your detentions by two months."

Although Harry dreaded having to apologize to the little weasel, three months of detention with Snape...well, that would suck a whole lot more.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

That night, Harry lay awake in bed, seriously considering withdrawing from Hogwarts.

It had been bad enough to discover that his Head of House absolutely hated him, that the Hogwarts Board was against him and that members of his own House had almost killed him.

However, far worse was Dumbledore's handling of the situation. He was seriously expected to apologize to the person who planned the attack in the locker room? Where was the justice in that? Upon coming to Hogwarts, Dumbledore had promised that he would be able to protect him from the ill forces which surrounded Hogwarts, but that hadn't quite happened.

He understood that Dumbledore thought that Draco hadn't really meant everything he'd said, but that didn't change the fact that he had said it. Did Dumbledore really expect him to have any sympathy for Malfoy after that? It was completely insane.

He had suffered grievous injury this year, but had hidden it from his guardians, remembering their promise to pull him from Hogwarts at the first sign of trouble. Well, there had been plenty of trouble, but he had been too attached to the school. Certainly, it had its issues, but he had great friends, for the most part great professors and he even got to start on the Quidditch team.

Initially, while Beauxbatons had always remained an option in the back of his mind, he had resisted going. He didn't speak the language, was unfamiliar with the culture, he'd have to leave his friends behind, and who knew how the French students would have received him there?

After more than half a year at Hogwarts, he was starting to see that it may not have been possible for their reception to be any worse than the treatment he got here.

Fine, he'd go along with Dumbledore, try to make nice with Malfoy, even though it was the last thing in the world he wanted to do. Sadly, the ironclad trust he used to have in Dumbledore had since faded. If he was attacked again, could he even depend on the Headmaster? Regardless, he'd play their game, for now.

But if things didn't change?

Beauxbatons it was.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

The following morning, Harry was the first student at breakfast. He quickly inhaled a few scones before departing for the infirmary. He really didn't want to see Draco again, but if there was going to be any truce achieved, breakfast was a good time, as it was his best chance to catch Draco by himself.

He had thought long and hard during the night, deciding how to approach Draco. Ultimately, Dumbledore's suggestion that symbols

were important led him to an answer. It was really his only chance, seeing as how if he didn't think he could be pleasant to Draco for any extended amount of time.

Upon entering the infirmary, the Malfoy heir was nowhere to be found, although there were a few beds with curtains drawn around them. Not wanting to disturb anyone's privacy, he went over to Pomfrey's office, and poked his head.

"Good morning Madam Pomfrey," Harry greeted. The matron, seated at her desk and reading the Quibbler, looked up at his voice.

"Good morning to you, Mister Potter. What can I do for you this morning?"

"I'm actually looking for Draco Malfoy. Is he still here?"

The matron nodded.

"He's in the far corner."

"Thanks," Harry said, and began to walk away, but she stopped him with a hand motion.

"Mister Potter, I'm trusting you to not resume last night's confrontation, so don't let me down."

"I'll be good," Harry assured with a nod. She didn't say it, but he was well-aware there would be severe consequences if he started anything. He moved over to Draco's bed, which was covered by thick white curtains.

"Are you awake?" Harry asked in a deep voice, an admittedly poor attempt to mask his identity.

"I wasn't, but some idiot woke me up with stupid questions," Draco's answered crossly. Sighing, aware that the Malfoy heir wasn't in a good mood, he stepped inside the perimeter.

Draco Malfoy was sitting upright in his bed, his blond hair mussed and a large white patch covering his right eye.

"What the fuck do you want?" Draco snarled.

"I...I'm sorry about last night," Harry apologized, telling himself that this was all going to worth it when he was spending time with his friends as opposed to gutting toads.

"So I guess it's not enough to embarrass me in front of all of Slytherin?" the blond boy sneered. "You also have to rub my face in it by bothering me here?"

"You know, if you had been even a little sorry about what happened in the locker room, I wouldn't have come after you."

Draco snorted derisively.

"The only thing I'm sorry for is that I didn't stick around to help Higgs smash your face in."

Though his instincts were screaming for him to curse Draco, he restrained himself, but was fully aware that if he had to listen to the blond boy anymore, he'd lose all civility. Instead, he withdrew Draco's silver pendant from his robes, and held it in front of Draco.

"You're fucking pathetic!" Draco yelled, his face livid. "Were your useless parents so poor you had to start stealing from me?"

Wordlessly, Harry took the pendant and placed it on the bedside table. Draco immediately went silent, and for a fleeting moment, a look of gratitude crossed his features.

"Get out of here Potter!" Draco abruptly yelled, masking his initial reaction with anger. "Once this term's over, I'm going after you."

Harry shrugged. The thought didn't exactly terrify him.

"At least I'll have a peaceful term," he remarked, before walking away from the Malfoy heir. He hadn't wanted to part with it, but thought it might diminish their animosity if he returned it.

He hadn't wanted to part with it, but it was the only symbol that Harry could think of that might get through to Draco. Harry had an inkling that Draco had stolen it from his parents, and would have been in serious trouble had it went missing permanently.

Besides, if it didn't, he'd already proved once he could kick Draco's ass, pendant or not.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

A week later found Harry walking down the seventh floor corridor which held the Headmaster's Office. He took a quick glance at the gargoyles as he passed it, before stopping at the second door on his left. There had been multiple assurances that he wasn't going to face any charges from the Board of Governors, but when the Ministry was involved, he didn't trust anything to go as it should. Taking a deep breath, he entered the room.

Far from being the gloomy inquisitorial chamber he had anticipated, it looked more like a meeting room. A large window occupied the entire far wall, washing the entire room in sunlight, while an oak table, polished to a fine sheen, ran the entire length of the room. Seated at the table were two apparent Board members, a witch and a wizard.

At his entrance, the wizard, a short, pudgy man with a graying, receding hairline and red cheeks rose.

"The name's Algernon Longbottom," the man said as he approached, hand outstretched.

"Um, Harry Potter," he replied ungracefully, shaking the man's hand. He certainly hadn't been expecting a friendly greeting from a Board member, let alone a member of Neville's family. Wasn't this the guy that had dropped his friend out of a window?

"And this is my colleague, Edlyn Edgecombe," Algernon said, motioning to the seated woman, who seemed possessed of a haughty demeanor.

"My schedule is rather busy today, so we need to get this debacle started immediately," the middle-aged strawberry blonde replied, ignoring her colleague's introduction.

Rather than being put-off by her dismissal, Algernon's grin widened.

"Have a seat, my boy," he implored, motioning to a seat across from Edgecombe. Once Harry sat, Algernon made his way back to his seat slowly, humming under his breath. With every note, he saw that Edgecombe's expression hardened and grew dourer. It was with great difficulty that he kept a smile off his face at their obvious animosity.

"Just so you know, Harry," Algernon began, leaning forward on his elbows, "in the event of a situation here at Hogwarts that might violate wizarding law, the Ministry has Hogwarts Board members directly tackle the situation and determine if any laws have been broken. Also, we determine if any legal action is required on behalf of the Ministry."

"Which certainly appears to be the case here," Edgecombe added, her eyes boring into Harry.

"Nonsense," Algernon countered, "nothing has been determined yet. If you could, would you please recall what happened a week ago within the Slytherin Common Room?"

Harry did so, leaving nothing out. It seemed that every word he said, Edgecombe transcribed, which unnerved him slightly.

"So you admit using torture upon Draco Malfoy?" Edgecombe asked immediately following his story.

"Yeah, but-"

"Are you aware, Mister Potter," she continued, cutting him off, "that according to the International Ban on Dueling, article three, subsection five, using torture techniques on a combatant is punishable by a thousand galleon fine?"

A displeased-looking Algernon swung his head around and stared intently at his colleague.

"This hearing will be conducted in a professional manner, or you will excuse yourself from this room."

Edgecombe snorted derisively at the reprimand.

"Once again eating out of Dumbledore's hand, are you?"

"Torture, by the very article you quoted, is defined as an act using permanent physical injury to forcibly extract information," Algernon clarified, ignoring his colleague's comment. "Seeing as Harry only used stinging hexes, article three does not apply here."

"There is still the undeniable fact that he caused grievous injury to Mister Malfoy, as the Hogwarts' matron confirmed," she shot back.

"Which is nullified by the self-defense clause, as Malfoy was the first to cast."

"That does not apply to students!" Edgecombe exclaimed, clearly agitated.

"Oh, I assure you it does, Madam Edgecombe, since as you are so quick to point out, Ministry law supercedes the rules of Hogwarts," Algernon gleefully stated.

Ignoring him, she turned to Harry.

"The Ministry has rules in place for a reason, and you are not above the law, Potter. If you don't keep in line, the Ministry will be forced to come down upon you."

Her warning given, she got up and stormed away from the room, leave a slightly shocked Harry behind. This woman was a professional?

"Um, am I all set?" he hesitantly asked.

Algernon let out a bellowing laugh.

"You've nothing to worry about; the Board didn't have a leg to stand on. Stinging hexes aren't exactly classified as the Dark Arts, and the defense clause covered the rest."

"Well, thanks for the help," he replied, grateful that there was at least one person on his side on the board. It would have gotten very ugly if there hadn't been.

"I owe you a hundred times over for being Neville's friend," Algernon replied, waving off his thanks.

"Um, Neville has always been there when I needed help," he stated, slightly uncomfortable with the claim, like befriending Neville was a charitable act or something.

"Neville is a fine lad, but always had trouble making friends, never seemed to get along well with other kids his age."

"He was kinda shy on the Hogwarts Express," Harry admitted, not exactly surprised that Neville was somewhat of a lonely child.

"He's always been a bit shy and nervous, but he seemed to be more talkative and held himself with more confidence during Christmas break. I mean, he even learned to fly!"

Harry couldn't help but think that his family certainly didn't encourage it, never allowing Neville near a broom, but he held his tongue, and shrugged instead.

"Flying always came easy to me, so I thought I'd teach my friends how to do it too."

"It's a small thing, but small things often go the furthest, Harry. But listen to me, babbling on when you probably have actual fun things to do. You're free to go, just try to stay a little closer within the confines of the law."

Harry grinned at his statement.

"I'll do what I can, sir."

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

April 11, 1992

At Hermione and Tracey's insistence, their Saturday study sessions within the library had become more intensive, longer affairs. Harry was pretty sure that he didn't need the extra study time, but it certainly helped Millicent and Neville, so he didn't mind attending them too much, as they got something out of it.

"How are Snape's detentions going?" Neville asked, looking up from his Potions book.

"The Board couldn't have come up with a worse punishment," Harry said with a groan.

"I guess Snape must have taken the Board's decision badly," Millicent mused, a slight smile upon her face.

"Yeah, I'd say so. I was lucky to have Neville's uncle on the Board, but at least I've only got another week of that greaseball breathing down my neck."

"Well, you probably should have thought of that before attacking Draco in the middle of the Common Room," Hermione added with a sniff, not looking up from her notes.

Tracey snorted derisively at the comment.

"Harry did try to invite Malfoy into an empty classroom, but for some reason, he kept on refusing."

"That's not the point!" she exclaimed, drawing a dark look from Madam Pince.

"I didn't like making an example out of Draco," Harry quickly said, hoping to diffuse the situation, "but I wasn't going to risk being attacked again."

Hermione shook her head.

"Harry, so many things could have gone wrong. You had people who could have helped you, but still you did it on your own. I think you were very lucky to beat Malfoy."

"I don't think so," Harry countered. "I'm way better at dueling, and I knew he wanted to make an example of me, so he had to do it on his own. There's no way Malfoy could have won on his own."

"What if Malfoy realized that though? He should have been smarter, and let his friends help. Are you always going to do things on your own too?"

"What's the matter?" Harry asked, dropping his voice slightly. While she still didn't agree with his actions in the Common Room, she seemed to be implying something else.

"On the way back to Hogwarts you promised that once you found a way to help with Quirrell, you'd let me know. It's been three months, and you haven't given me anything," she finished angrily, leaning back with her arms crossed.

"Shite," he muttered. "Look, I'm sorry."

"Well? Do you have anything?"

Harry nodded as he withdrew his wand, watching Madam Pince. The moment she turned around, he cast a privacy charm around their table. He hesitated for a moment, knowing how strange it was going to sound, but pushed on.

"We need to be on the lookout for intestines...human intestines."

At his comment, everyone else around the table grew confused. Unsurprisingly. With a sigh, he elaborated.

"One of my guardians, Perenelle, is a Herbologist. She came up with one of the defenses within the third-floor corridor, a magical vine hybrid, that can't be destroyed by spellfire."

"Guts?" Neville asked, as if hoping that Harry would give a different answer.

"Yeah, guts. The vine's only weakness is an acid only found within the small intestine."

The group was silent after his explanation. After a few moments, Tracey broke it with a bitter laugh.

"Great. So now we have to worry about Quirrell stealing our guts?"

Harry shook his head.

"No, just a small section. If he got only a small sample, he could brew enough to eat through the section protecting the door."

"This is disgusting," Millicent said with a grimace.

"It is," Hermione agreed, before turning back to Harry. "This means we need to keep an eye out for stomach wounds, or students having stomach problems."

"This will be easy," Tracey quipped. "During meals we'll just ask everyone to pull up their shirts."

"I know it's not much," he said, slightly annoyed by Tracey's comment, "but it's something to start with."

"Well, it's certainly more than we had before," Hermione conceded.

"Yeah, about that," Harry said, leaning forward. "Um..no one is supposed to know anything about the third-floor corridor. No one. I'm taking a risk by telling you guys anything. Dumbledore can't know I told you anything."

"He's afraid of information being pulled from our minds, isn't he?" Millicent asked.

"Yeah, I think so," Harry confirmed. "If any of you find anything, just come and get me, day or night. If you wait outside my Common Room, someone will let you in eventually."

"Uh, Harry...we don't know where the Slytherin Common Room is," Neville pointed out.

Harry smacked himself in the forehead, and gave them the directions. Maybe the other Slytherins wouldn't let them in, but there was a fair chance they would at least alert him.

"So I guess you can't tell us what's behind the third-floor corridor?" Hermione said with a small smile.

"Sorry, but I can't. It's even a risk to tell you about one of the protections, but I wanted to give you guys a chance to help. Just know that in the wrong hands, whatever's hidden in the third-floor corridor is very, very dangerous."

Hermione looked unhappy about being left out of the loop, but said nothing more.

"No offense, Harry, but I really hope I never have to find you there," Neville admitted. "The Slytherins would probably eat me alive if I showed up at the door."

Millicent laughed at his comment.

"What's life without a few risks?"

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

May 27, 1992

The desks of the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom had all been pushed against the walls, leaving a large, empty space in the middle of the classroom. Students circled around it, eagerly watching the two first-years in the middle.

"You two know the rules," Quirrell stated from the front of the class, his arms crossed, his normally stern expression slightly relaxed. "No spells which cause physical harm, no transfiguration and no conjuration."

"Yeah, right," Zacharias snorted, "like anyone but Potter has to worry about that."

"As Harry is on the floor right now, it's entirely pertinent," Quirrell replied, getting a few chuckles from the class. "The duel will continue until one duelist either loses their wand, forfeits, or is unable to continue. Understood?"

"Yes sir," Harry answered promptly, a wide grin upon his face. Padma, his opponent, her face tightened in concentration, echoed his response.

"Good. You may begin."

Padma, like a coil sprung, flung a body-bind at him with an exaggerated thrust of her wand. Harry strafed to the side, launching a tickling hex at her. She spun around to the right to avoid it, launching a stunner coming out of it, which Harry deflected right back at her with a quickly conjured shield, before casting a body-bind to her left. Padma danced away from her own stunner, and

stepped directly into the body-bind. She immediately stiffened and fell over backwards.

"Well done, Harry," Quirrell congratulated.

"Thanks," Harry replied, moving over to Padma's still form and undoing the body-bind. The spell undone, he extended a hand down to her.

"I can't believe I fell for that!" she exclaimed, slamming her fists against the ground in frustration, ignoring his hand.

"Just look at it as a lesson," Harry said with a shrug. "You probably won't do it again."

Shaking her head slightly, a rueful smile on her face, she took Harry's hand. Marveling at the softness of her hand, Harry pulled her lightly to her feet. Once up, she let go, dusting off her robes.

"You better watch out, Potter," she warned with a grin. "You keep giving me help, I'm going to get better than you."

Harry let out a chuckle.

"It'd be nice to finally have some competition from you simpletons."

Padma stuck her tongue out at him, before smiling and walking away to rejoin the rest of her friends in Ravenclaw, who immediately set to giggling to one another. Quite content, Harry walked back to his spot between Tracey and Millicent.

"Maybe next time, you two should get a room," Zacharias quipped.

"Isn't it sad how easily greatness creates envy?" Harry asked loudly, gauging Padma's reaction. He observed that the rising blush began to recede, and she looked relieved to have the spotlight deflected away from her.

"Dammit Potter, you even take the fun out of insulting people," Zacharias said with a laugh.

Harry took an exaggerated bow at the statement, before rejoining his Slytherin friends. As he did, Quirrell called for their attention.

"I hope that you all enjoyed today's surprise."

The assembled students, Harry included, murmured in agreement, having a lot of fun actually getting to duel one another, as opposed to just practicing spells.

"It took a lot of hard work, but each one of you is now far more skilled than when you first arrived. Congratulations to you all."

Looking around, Harry observed that most of the class was almost glowing with pride. He would have been too, if he wasn't so suspicious of Quirrell, despite four months without any suspicious activity from the Defense instructor.

"On that note, I wish you all the best of luck on your exams, and urge you to keep working on your skills. Does anyone have any final questions before we disband?"

Looking around the class, Harry noticed Padma's dark arm in the air.

"Yes, Miss Patil?"

"Well...I don't know about everyone else, but I really enjoyed this. Since we don't have any other classes to worry about after exams, would you hold one more class after exams are over?"

Quirrell appeared to think about it.

"Is there anyone else who would be interested?" he asked, addressing the entire class, whom replied enthusiastically to the proposal.

"In that case, certainly, Miss Patil."

"Good, thanks," Padma quickly said. "I want another chance at Potter."

"In more ways than one," Anthony Goldstein quipped, drawing another blush from Padma and laughter from the rest of the class.

"If you're taking requests, Professor, maybe me and Goldstein can have a real wizarding duel," Harry replied, causing that class's laughter to immediately shift to the Ravenclaw.

"No way," Goldstein said, shaking his head. "I'd like to see twelve."

"We shall see," Quirrell said with a small, almost secret smile. "Goodnight to you all, and good luck on your exams."

With the professor's statement, the students began to shuffle out, talking amongst themselves. Harry, one of the last ones out, looked back to see Quirrell standing in front of his office, regarding the students as they left. He inclined his head slightly at Harry, before entering his open office and closing the door behind him.

"What are you hiding?" Harry said to himself, before shaking his head and following his friends out.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Giving one final tug on his shin-guard strap, Harry got up and donned the weatherproof robes that the Flamels had gotten him, throwing his normal Slytherin Quidditch robes over them. The day was unseasonably cold, made much worse by the accompanying torrential downpour. He picked up his broom, giving it one final inspection before exiting the locker room.

Upon exiting the locker room, it was like he had been hit with a bucket of water, while the wind roared in his ears as he made his way toward the pitch. If not for the Flamels' gift, he would have already been soaked through. Glancing around, he observed that his fellow Slytherin teammates looked like prisoners marching toward a death sentence.

As terrifying as Flint may have been, he did have the unique ability to motivate his players with death threats, inspiring over-achievement. Without him, there was no real leader or captain, with Derrick gaining the designation merely through seniority. It also didn't help that Flint had been by far their best Chaser.

Shaking his head slightly, he entered onto the pitch. He couldn't worry about any of that now, Hufflepuff certainly didn't care if they were short-handed. At the very least, the forecast had been

accurate, so his plan might actually have a chance at succeeding, despite how much the rest of the team were initially opposed to it.

Unsurprisingly, boos rained down from the stands as Slytherin took to the air, loud despite the roaring of the storm. It appeared that after five consecutive years of Slytherin winning the Quidditch Cup, the school was desperate for a win from any of the other Houses. In all probability, Harry knew Slytherin had no chance at the cup. Even though every team had the same record, Slytherin was at the bottom of the standings, due to their abysmal showing against Ravenclaw during the winter. They needed to win by three hundred points to even crawl out of the basement. In light of that fact, Harry had conceived a plan to score as many points as possible, to make a run at the points lead.

Ahead of him, in the center of the pitch, Derrick and the Hufflepuff captain, Diggory, appeared to be talking to Hooch, but he couldn't really tell what was going on. Moments later Hooch's shrill whistle cutting through the storm, signaling the start of the game.

Mud squelched out from beneath his boots as he kicked out hard from the ground, taking to the air.

"The Quaffle is immediately taken by Montague, the sole remaining starting Chaser left on the Slytherin team. Pity about that. Montague dodges a nice Bludger from Cadwallader, and passes to...Potter!"

Grinning wide against the torrent, Harry streaked up the pitch. He fainted to the right, freezing the Keeper, before firing a perfect shot at the left-hand goal. Flying back to the center, Harry allowed himself a single fist-pump before resuming his scan for the Snitch.

"I don't believe it! Potter scores! What about the Snitch! This has got to be against the rules!"

The crowd booed intensely at Harry, but he was in the clear. While the professional leagues forbid Seekers from touching the Quaffle, there was no such distinction according to the Hogwarts Quidditch rules. In the driving rain, the chances of finding the Snitch were scarce, so he had practiced as Chaser leading up to the match, knowing a one-man advantage was the only way Slytherin could possibly accumulate enough points to challenge for the Cup.

The Hufflepuff team was livid with rage; Diggory had called a time-out to argue his case, but Hooch just shook her head. Visibly angry, the Hufflepuff took to the skies as play resumed.

"So after Potter's cheating, it's 10 – 0, Slytherin. Summerby advances the Quaffle, goes to...oh no!"

Summerby, keeping an eye on the Bludger, didn't see Harry swoop down from above and pickpocket the Quaffle. The rest of Hufflepuff was slow to react, barely moving toward their goal before Harry had fired another shot past their Keeper, raising raucous cheers from the Slytherin stands.

"20 – 0, Slytherin. Apparently no one cares Potter is supposed to be playing Seeker. Hufflepuff back in possession, Summerby in control, passes to Stebbins – no, he lost it, nice Bludger by Derrick, picked up by Montague. Passes to Yaxley- flips to Potter – and he scores!"

The loud groan from most of the school was drowned out by the loud cheers from the Slytherins stands.

"And Diggory calls timeout! It looks like he's had enough – and who can blame him, after the Slytherin Seeker has scored all the game's goals!"

Diggory was indeed yelling at his gathered team, the captain apparently deciding that a change of strategy was in order. Harry took the opportunity to continue his search for the Snitch, but it was almost an exercise in futility, with the poor visibility.

"So play resumes with Summerby advancing the Quaffle. And what's this? Stebbins is sticking to Potter like a shadow! Let's see you score a goal with Hufflepuff's fastest flyer on you!"

Grinning at the commentary, he climbed higher, forcing the Seeker to follow him, drawing him away from the main area of the pitch.

"Summerby loses the Quaffle, picked up by Montague, passes to Yaxley, passes back to Montague – and he scores! 40 – 0, Slytherin. And the new Hufflepuff captain is irate!"

Unable to adapt to facing four Chasers, the Hufflepuffs fell behind quickly, down one-hundred points within ten minutes. Diggory continued his search for the Snitch, but had no luck against the fury of the elements, and grew increasingly frustrated by Slytherin's tactics. After Yaxley, playing surprisingly good for his first real Quidditch match, scored another goal, pushing the Slytherin lead to over a hundred, Diggory called for another time out.

"And here we have another stoppage in play. This is certainly not how the new Hufflepuff captain wanted to end his first year. He's going to have to make a major change, or this match is going to get even uglier."

Giving one last look for the Snitch, Harry motioned for the rest of the team to gather around him, which they quickly did it.

"Shite! Potter, your plan is actually working!" Montague exclaimed, giving him a hard punch to the shoulder. Harry assumed it was supposed to be a show of endearment.

"We still need a bunch of points," Bole said crossly.

"Then why don't you do something about it instead of fucking whining," Derrick replied hotly. "Pulling your bat out of your arse would be a good start. You are a Beater, right? You could have passed for a fucking spectator."

Bole went to reply, but Harry cut him off.

"How about we actually concentrate on the game? Diggory's going to make a change, so we do too?"

"You think he's going to try playing Chaser too?" Montague asked, eyeing the gathered Hufflepuffs.

"Yeah, I do," Harry said. "How long has Diggory been playing Seeker for?"

"He was a reserve his first two years, only started the past two," Derrick replies. "He's never played Chaser."

"Good, good," Harry said, pleased by the news. "That means he's probably never practiced at Chaser either. He's a good flier, but isn't used to handling the Quaffle."

"And I thought you were insane to practice at Chaser for the past two months," Montague said, shaking his head slightly.

"Maybe I was. Anyway, the 'Puffs are frustrated. We need to use that. Bump them slightly, taunt them, but don't foul them! We need them to play stupid, make them foul us."

At his statement, Hooch's whistle blew again, indicating the match was about to resume.

"Remember, play smart!" Montague roared, before they flew back into position.

"Play is about to resume. Let's see what Diggory's got cooked up for the snakes!"

As play resumed, Harry's prediction turned out to be correct, as it was Diggory that was advancing the Quaffle.

"I don't believe it! Now Diggory's playing Chaser! Ladies and gentlemen, I have never seen a match like this before! Diggory hands off to Stebbins, back to Diggory, he fumbled it! Potter in position, catches it, passes to Montague, he shoots – he scores! 140 – 20, Slytherin!"

Cadwallader, frustrated by his team's efforts, took out his frustration on a Bludger. Seeing an opportunity, Montague flew to his right slightly, making it appear that he just barely avoided it. Hooch blew her whistle immediately.

"Penalty to Slytherin! Are they serious? That didn't even come close to hitting him!"

An irate Cadwallader flew up to Hooch and began to yelling at her, prompting her to blow on her whistle again.

"Another penalty! Why are the cheating snakes getting all the calls!"

A grinning Montague put both shots by easily, inducing the Slytherin section to get ever louder.

"Slytherin up, 160 – 20. This match is the biggest sham I've even seen! Potter and the other snakes should be ashamed of themselves!

Diggory, after chewing out his Beater, advanced the Quaffle, before passing it off to Summerby.

"Potter, you're making a real arse of me today!" Diggory yelled, struggling to make himself heard over the wind as he streaked down the pitch.

"Sorry about that," Harry replied with a shrug, streaking after Summerby. He thought Diggory might be angrier, but there almost seemed to be an amused note in the captain's voice.

"Summerby dodges Potter – no, watch out for the Bludger! Yaxley gains possession, flips to Potter. Somebody stop him! Flips to Montague, he shoots....dammit!"

Bit-by-bit, Diggory's strategy was proven to be flawed. After another ten minutes, the Slytherins had increased their lead by another hundred points. Diggory, realizing that his strategy wasn't working, after yet another Slytherin score, called another time-out, their last one for the match.

Montague quickly motioned for all of the Slytherins to convene to the center.

"I think he's going to use Cadwallader as another Chaser," he said, mostly talking to Harry, who nodded in response.

"Yeah, I think so too. We're up by over two hundred, what do you say about just sitting on this lead, while I go find us the Snitch?"

"Potter, you're fucking good," Montague complimented, before turning to his Beaters. "Derrick, Bole, you're going to guard the other two goals. The 'Puffs are going to get frustrated, foul you, but just deal with it. We just need to maintain until Potter gets the Snitch. Let's fucking do this!"

The Slytherins quickly got back into position, with the two Beaters playing closer to the goals than before.

"And when you thought this game couldn't get any crazier? Diggory is using Cadwallader as a Chaser. Your move, Potter!"

Harry quickly abandoned playing Chaser, and soared high above the pitch, searching for the Snich, Diggory following him closely.

"See anything interesting, Potter!" his Seeker counterpart yelled, scanning the pitch as he did so.

"Not yet! If I find anything, you'll be the first to know!" Harry replied, earning a hearty laugh from the Hufflepuff captain, who shook his head and continued to scan the pitch. From so high above, it was difficult to hear the commentary, but from what he could tell, it seemed like the score hadn't shifted a great deal.

After a few minutes, through the storm, he spied a glint of gold near the Hufflepuff goals. He immediately took off, accelerating quickly through the storm. The wind threatened to knock him off, but he merely tightened his grip on the broom. As he descended, the commentary was once again audible.

"It looks like Potter's seen the Snitch, but Diggory's fast on his tail!"

There it was, up ahead! Pulling forth every bit of speed from his broom, Harry leaned low, cutting through the air like an arrow. Diggory breathing down his neck, he reached towards the golden object. the roar of the crowd in his ears. Straining forward, his fingers closed around the Snitch.

Victory!

"Slytherin wins! 440 – 60! The snakes aren't out of it yet!"

As his teammates landed and celebrated, Harry flew over to Diggory, who was consoling his teammates. Ignoring the angry eyes upon him, he approached Diggory.

"Potter, I really hope you didn't come over here to gloat," the blond snapped, the huge loss robbing him of his good cheer.

Harry shook his head.

"I just wanted to say that this was the only chance my House had to win, it's nothing personal. It would never work again; it's only useful against teams who aren't expecting it."

Diggory smiled ruefully.

"Well, I guess that takes some of the sting out. Thanks Potter."

Harry extended his hand, which the Hufflepuff captain accepted, squeezing his hand a little harder than what was necessary.

"But that doesn't mean I'm not going to count the days until our rematch," the captain clarified.

Grinning, Harry took his hand back.

"Same here," he replied, before flying back to his teammates, who immediately mobbed him. He was immediately ripped from his broom, and held aloft on the shoulders of not just his teammates, but the other Slytherins that had run down onto the pitch. Oblivious to the pouring rain, they carried him around the pitch, chanting a single word.

"Potter! Potter! Potter! Potter!"

After a few minutes they let him down, and his hand practically fell off from being shaken too many times. Older students who had mocked him, insulted him, now shook his hand with something close to reverence. More importantly, however, was the most prominent emotion he saw reflected within all of their eyes.

Respect.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

June 1, 1992

Hermione Granger was glad to have supported Harry during Slytherin's victory over Hufflepuff, but had begun to think that perhaps it had been a foolish decision. The unseasonably cold

weather, combined with a torrential downpour of biblical proportions had not made for an optimal viewing experience.

Nonetheless, she had endured and stayed for the entire match. The few months had been rather rough for Harry, and after all he had done for his friends, he deserved their support.

Now, she was paying the price.

It had started out as a mere cold, but seemed to have evolved into something else. Her nose was so congested that breathing through it was an exercise in futility. The nights were utter torture, as sleep became difficult when she was constantly coughing to clear the air passages in her throat. Every movement was an exercise in will, as she had almost no energy.

She was well-aware of her sickness, but couldn't spare the time to see the Hogwarts matron. After all, she did have exams to study for. Any potions that Madam Pomfrey could have given her would have knocked her out for at least a day, if not more. No, she would get through the exams, and then get some medical treatment.

That was the plan, anyway.

"I'm not going to let you do this anymore."

Hermione, sitting in a chair in the Gryffindor Common Room, didn't even bother looking at Neville's words.

"Hold on a second, I'm in the middle of a passage."

Before she could react, she felt the book pulled from her fingers. Her eyes darted up just in time to see Neville close the book, a look of determination on his face.

"What's your problem?" she snapped, annoyed at the intrusion. Wasn't it obvious she had work to do?

"You're...killing yourself over these exams," Neville replied, shaking his head.

She went to reply, but her airway clogged before she could, inducing a violent coughing fit. Before she got it under control, black spots danced at the edges of her vision.

"I'm not that bad," Hermione stubbornly argued.

"Hermione..." Neville pleaded, "How can you say that after nearly coughing up a lung?"

"Well – exams are important," she insisted.

"So is living," Neville replied. "We're going to see Pomfrey right now."

She started to protest, but Neville just shook his head.

"You don't have a choice on this one. Sorry."

"Fine," she conceded, with equal parts bitterness and humor, slowly getting to her feet. Together they left, making their way towards the infirmary. She was concerned a prefect might give them trouble for being out past curfew, but they didn't run across any on their way.

Upon arriving at the infirmary, the matron took one look at Hermione's state before forcing her to sit down on one of the beds.

"Why did you wait this long?" the matron demanded as she poured a smoking red potion into a pewter goblet.

"Well..." she started, but Pomfrey forced the pewter goblet into her hand, cutting her off.

"Drink," she ordered, her voice offering no room for argument. Hermione did as ordered, drinking it all down in a large gulp. It tasted like a mix between cinnamon and ginger, an odd, but not entirely distasteful combination. Far better than she had anticipated.

"You will rest all day tomorrow," the matron continued after the goblet was empty, "a house-elf can bring up your meals."

"What about tomorrow's exams!" Hermione exclaimed, causing Neville to break out into a large grin.

"You can either rest all day tomorrow," Pomfrey responded, her eyes narrowed, "or you can spend the rest of the week in the infirmary if I find out that you've went against my instructions. Are we clear?"

"Yes, Madam Pomfrey," she replied, her voice bitter. Unable to hold it in anymore, Neville broke into laughter.

"Yeah, so glad you forced me here," Hermione sarcastically thanked Neville.

"Anytime."

Following his statement, the infirmary door opened again, admitting the defense instructor. Quirrell had his hand pressed up against his midsection, which was soaked through with blood. Pomfrey's eyes went wide at the sight, and she ran over, before quickly ushering him over to a bed.

"What happened Quirinus?" the matron asked as she settled him upon a bed.

"Sadly, an overzealous student hit me with a slicing curse during an exercise," the instructor calmly answered. "I would have sealed it myself, but I thought you should look at it, in case there was any internal damage."

From across the room, Hermione's ears perked up at the exchange. Quirrell, according to Harry's accounts, seemed to be one of the most skilled wizards at Hogwarts. Certainly not someone who would make a mistake such as taking a curse from a student. Grunting with effort, she heaved herself off the bed, and began to make her way to Quirrell's area, motioning for a nervous looking Neville to follow her. Pomfrey had pulled a large white curtain around the bed, blocking the two from sight.

"I'll get something for the pain," they heard Pomfrey say.

"That will not be necessary," Quirrell countered, "it doesn't hurt that badly."

"If you insist," Pomfrey conceded, her voice doubtful, before casting diagnostic charms upon his midsection. After a minute of complex incantations, she stopped.

"It must have been a powerful curse," Pomfrey stated in a somber voice. "The damage is quite severe, I'm afraid."

"How bad is it?"

"The curse sliced through your small intestine. If you hadn't come straight here, there would have been a severe risk of serious infection. As it is, it's very lucky that you didn't do even worse damage. Not to worry, though, I'll have you fixed up in no time."

"Thank you, Poppy," Quirrell replied, as if he was unconcerned with the diagnosis.

At Pomfrey's words, Hermione looked at Neville, and saw the same fear she felt reflected in his eyes.

"Intestines?" he silently mouthed.

Tracey was right! It was Quirrell the entire time. In a haze of anger, all feelings of sickness faded. Burbage's murderer was walking around, and was planning to break into the third-floor corridor.

"We have to get Harry," she ordered, before slinking out of the infirmary, Neville hesitantly following. At the movement, she began to grow slightly dizzy, but shook it off. She'd be fine; the most important thing right now was to stop that murderer from getting what he wanted.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry sat alone in the Common Room, his friends having gone to sleep a few minutes ago. It was nights like this one that he truly appreciated his unique ability to go with minimal amounts of sleep. While his classmates crammed as much as they could, he had the luxury of taking his time, allowing him to read between studying sessions. It was not a coincidence that he wasn't burned out yet, as his friends were dangerously close to being.

"There's some Gryffindors at the door," a female voice said from above his seated position. Looking up, he saw that it was Daphne. He hadn't much conversation with the raven-haired girl, being on the fringes of Malfoy's entourage, but she never went out of her way to antagonize him.

"Oh, thanks," Harry replied as he jumped up from the chair. Hermione and Neville were the only ones who knew where the Slytherin Common Room was located, and wouldn't have come down so late unless it was something really important. Did they find something?

"Potter, you told the Gryffindors where we are!" Malfoy incredulously yelled, apparently overhearing Daphne's message. He ignored the blond boy and ran out into the corridor, where Hermione and Neville nervously waited.

"What's going on?"

Quickly, they both told him what they had seen at the infirmary.

"Bollocks," Harry said quietly, stunned by what his friends had seen. It all fit. Quirrell was behind everything. Instead of doing the surgery on someone else, knowing the house-elves were watching him, he must have walked into a cutting curse. The elves wouldn't have been able to tell that he wasn't trying to heal himself, but was excising a part of his small intestine.

"Go get Dumbledore," Harry ordered, trying to fight through the haze of anger that was settling over him. Snape was closer, but he couldn't risk the Potions Master outright ignoring the claims of two Gryffindors.

"What are you going to do?" Neville asked.

"I'm going to stall Quirrell."

"Absolutely not!" Hermione exclaimed. "That's crazy, we're going with you."

"There's no time! Quirrell could be duplicating the enzyme right now, and is about to go find the St...I have to stall him, and sorry, but you look like you're about to pass out."

She started to object, but Neville cut her off.

"He's right," he said to Hermione, before turning back to Harry. "You're going to stay hidden under the cloak, right?"

"Yeah. If Quirrell's still inside, I'll freeze the lock. If the elves see Quirrell blast down a door, they'll pop over to Dumbledore immediately. He won't be able to risk any strange behavior right now."

"Fine," Hermione said, clearly not pleased, "but don't be foolish, Harry. You can't take down Quirrell by yourself."

"I know, get going, we need Dumbledore for this," Harry urged. "Just tell him it's about the Stone, he'll understand!"

"Be careful Harry," Hermione pleaded, before the two of them set off towards the Headmaster's Office. He immediately spun around and ran through the Common Room, back to his dormitory. He quickly ripped the invisibility cloak from his trunk, and ran back outside, where he saw Daphne about to enter the girl's dormitory.

"Daphne!" he shouted, inspiration striking him. The girl in question turned, her annoyance quickly turning to apprehension at the look upon his face.

"Uh, yeah?"

"Wake up Millie and Tracey now! Tell them that Quirrell is after the Stone, and they need to go tell Snape!"

"S..s..sure," Daphne replied, frightened by the vehemence in his tone, but she immediately rushed into the girl's dormitory. The message relayed, he turned heel and sprinted through the Common Room. On his way out, he noticed that Malfoy and his entourage weren't there anymore, but he quickly purged the information from thought.

He had far more important matters to attend to.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Author Notes:

Right on schedule. The year one finale is next, and will probably surface in three or four weeks.

Any comments, suggestions or criticisms would be deeply appreciated, and inspire me to write as opposed to playing video games. Even a quick "I liked it," or, "it sucked" will suffice. I'll make an effort to answer every review I get.

Thanks to my co-conspirators, darklordmike and mira mirth for their valuable assistance with plotting, characterization and continuity.

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Fifteenth Movement: Materialized in Stone

June 1, 1992

Harry, his invisibility cloak hiding him from sight, feet quieted by hastily applied silencing charms, sprinted through the halls of Hogwarts. Bounding up the stairs, taking them three at a time, he arrived onto the first-floor.

Though every part of him screamed to teach that lying bastard Quirrell a lesson, he was well aware that the Defense instructor could easily mop the floor with him. No, all he could hope to do was stall him, force him into making a mistake big enough for the house-elves to alert Dumbledore.

Breathing heavily, he stopped down the hall from Quirrell's classroom, trying to catch his breath. Hands on his knees, he inspected the door, and saw that it was slightly ajar. No light shone forth; the room was dark, most likely unoccupied. Was Quirrell even here, or was he too late?

Summoning his nerve, he crept up to the door, and listened carefully for any movement. Hearing none, he pushed the door open wide enough to catch a glimpse inside. Heart hammering in his chest, he took a deep breath, and looked within.

Nothing.

Slowly, he moved inside the empty classroom, and looked towards the office door. It was thankfully closed, but rays of flickering light seeped from beneath it, as if there was a fire or something within. Relief washed over him as he realized that Quirrell hadn't set out for the third-floor corridor yet, and he was mostly likely brewing the potion that would destroy the vines protecting the Stone.

Harry thought for a moment, trying to figure out the best way to go about stalling Quirrell. It certainly appeared that the professor had a cauldron in his office, and was doing something, but what step was he on? How long did it take to synthesize the acidic enzyme? He certainly didn't know. With a growl of frustration, he regretted his decision not to ask Nicolas.

Coming to a decision, he stepped back out into the hallway. Glancing around, he saw an alcove almost directly across from the door, which would make a good hiding spot. Wearing his cloak, he'd never be found. Carefully withdrawing his wand, he poked it out from under his cloak, and began to transfigure the knob assembly into stone, canceling the process halfway through. As he had hoped, the handle melted into the door's jam, effectively sealing the door. Once he cast the anti-transfiguration spell, if Quirrell wanted to get out, he'd have to blast the door down. This would hopefully alert the house-elves, causing them to get Dumbledore.

That was, unless his friends hadn't already reached the Headmaster's Office. Pleased with his work, about to cast the final spell, he stepped back, just in time for a bright light to hit his peripheral vision. He tried to react, but wasn't fast enough to avoid the follow-up spell. Immediately his body went rigid, and he felt himself begin to topple.

As he fell to the ground, one simple thought kept him from losing all hope:

At least Hermione and Neville were getting Dumbledore.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

"Stop!" Neville ordered, breaking out of his jog and putting his hands on his knees, trying to catch his breath.

Hermione stopped, and promptly collapsed to the floor, coughing violently, spraying the floor with a mixture of saliva and yellow phlegm. Shaking his head, he knelt next to the bushy-haired girl. He certainly wasn't in the best of shape, and was a bit short of breath, but his condition was far superior to Hermione's. Before he had stopped her, every one of her breaths had sounded like a dying gasp.

Yet she had still pushed on, driven by a determination stronger than any he'd seen. If she kept pushing herself, which he knew she would, she was going to pass out.

Hermione shook her head violently, flinging off beads of sweat, and went to speak, but didn't have the breath back to do so. Frustrated, she looked him in the eye.

"Harry," she silently mouthed.

"Harry does need our help, but if you don't stop, you're going to kill yourself. We need to wait until you can breathe again."

Hermione whipped her head back and forth in response. With a look of effort, she raised her arm and motioned for him to go on.

"Get help," she said, her lips moving silently.

Neville didn't like the thought of leaving her behind, but she was right. Harry was going to be in serious trouble if they didn't get to Dumbledore as soon as possible.

"Stay down until you can breathe, okay? I'll wait at the Headmaster's Office for you."

She nodded in response, and waved him on, imploring him to hurry. Hoping he was doing the right thing, he rose and took off down the corridor at a sprint. Reaching the staircase, he bounded up the stairs, two at a time, bringing him onto the seventh floor. Down the empty corridor he ran, only a few turns from the Headmaster's Office.

"Obfendi!"

The tripping jinx hit Neville in the back of his legs, tangling his legs beneath him. He left the air for a moment, before crashing headfirst into a suit of armor. He landed hard on the ground in an awkward tangle of limbs before the armor toppled and fell onto him. The little breath left in his lungs was forced out as the great weight pressed down upon him, pinning him to the ground. He tried to thrash his way out, but all he could move was his head.

"You were always too clumsy, Longbottom," a familiar voice mocked, followed by a chorus of cruel laughter. With a groan, Neville looked up to see Draco, a malicious smile on his face, flanked by Pansy, Crabbe and Goyle. He couldn't even respond for a moment, completely shocked that of all the times Malfoy could have picked, he chose now.

"Where's the mudblood?" Pansy mused. "I thought she'd be faster than chubby here."

"You can't do this!" Neville yelled, finally finding his voice. Dumbledore still didn't know!

"Oh yes we can," Draco replied, his smirk stretching wider. "Potter only made me promise to not attack him."

"His friends were fair game though," Pansy finished. "I wanted to humiliate that blonde mudblood slut, but there's always next week."

"You need to let me go right now!" Neville screamed, causing Crabbe and Goyle to cackle mindlessly.

"And why would I ever do that?" Draco asked incredulously, drawing further laughter from his cronies.

Neville started to explain, but to his horror, he saw Hermione turn the corner, head down. What was she doing here? She was supposed to wait longer!

"Get out-" was all Neville got out before Pansy's silencer robbed him off his voice. Hermione looked up at his warning, her eyes widening, and went for her wand, but Malfoy's disarmer got there first. The impact from the spell threw her backwards and wrenched the wand from her grasp. Hermione, panting with exertion and sickness, lunged for her wand, but Malfoy was faster, kicking the wand away. The muggleborn witch only had a moment's respite before Pansy's body-bind froze her.

"Gross, the mudblood has the plague," Malfoy said, wiping his hands on his robes. "Crabbe, Goyle, take her and prop her up against the wall."

His two dim cohorts did as ordered, propping Hermione's still form against the wall next to where Neville lay. He thrashed furiously at the armor pinning him at her helpless, terrified look, but still couldn't free himself.

"You're not that smart now, are you?" Draco asked with a cruel smirk, pacing back and forth in front of the prone girl.

"I've waited for this for so long," Pansy said. "Miss 'I-know-everything, pick me'."

"You have no place in our world, mudblood," Draco continued, a manic gleam in his eye, "and it's time for the world to see what you really are."

Neville was helpless to watch as Malfoy raised his wand, a spell on the tip of his tongue.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

At Daphne's urging, both Tracey and Millicent had immediately fled from the girls' dormitory, making their way through the gloomy halls of the dungeon.

"What do you think happened?" Millicent asked between heavy gasps of air.

"Harry and Hermione probably went to stall Quirrell, while Neville went to get Dumbledore," Tracey replied.

"They're not stupid enough to take on Quirrell by themselves."

"I don't know," Tracey replied, shaking her head as she ran. "Look at what happened with Malfoy in the Common Room. If Harry thinks his plan is good enough, he'll do anything."

The hulking girl had no reply for her assumption, unable to come up with a rebuttal. She liked Harry, she really did, but his confidence and risk-taking was sometimes infuriating.

At the end of her endurance, Tracey reached the Potions classroom door slightly ahead of her friend. She fumbled with the knob for a few turns, but the door wouldn't move.

"It's locked," she told Millicent, who immediately ran towards the door, shoulder first. She hit it hard, the impact driving her backwards, but the door barely shuddered.

"Open up!" Millicent yelled, banging her fists upon the door. Tracey went straight for her wand and unlocked it with a quick charm. Crossing quickly into the darkened room, she felt a slight magical disturbance wash over her.

"What was that?" Millicent asked warily.

"Snape might have detection wards up when his classroom isn't being used," she answered with a shrug, not really caring too much. Whatever it was, it hadn't hurt them.

Without warning, Snape exploded forth into the room from a back door, his expression one of vast displeasure.

"Davis! Bulstrode! Is there any reason you both are breaking into my classroom?"

"Harry's in trouble!" Tracey blurted out, eliciting a sneer from the Potions Master.

"More likely it's Potter that's the source of any trouble."

Tracey, suppressing her instinctual reaction to claw her professor's cold black eyes out, opted for shaking her head.

"Quirrell's after the Stone, and Harry went to stop him!"

The sneer immediately left Snape's face, and his already pale visage whitened further.

"How long ago did Potter leave?" he demanded, his voice low.

"We don't know," Millicent answered. "Maybe twenty minutes."

Snape, looking fearful for a short moment, withdrew his wand so quickly it seemed unnatural. He shot off a silvery shape that flew away quickly, disappearing into the wall, before turning back to the two girls.

"You two will go to the Headmaster's Office immediately, and wait. The password is 'Goobers'."

"We're going with you," Tracy challenged, shaking her head vehemently. "Harry is our friend."

"You will do no such thing," Snape swiftly replied, his voice brooking no argument. "Quirrell is far more dangerous than they realize, and I

cannot help Potter if I have to worry about watching over you two. Get moving!"

His order given, he turned heel and ran away, his dark robes billowing about him. Tracey thought she heard him mutter something about a life debt, but couldn't be sure. Once Snape was out of sight, she turned to Millicent.

"We should go help Harry anyway."

"Did you see the fear on Snape's face?" Millicent asked, shaking her head slightly.

"Yeah," she reluctantly admitted.

"Snape knows far more about this than we do. When we mentioned the Stone and Quirrell, he almost looked terrified. Anything bad enough to scare Snape...fucking terrifies me, Tracey. We can't handle this."

"So we just let Snape, the one professor who really hates Harry, take care of this?" she asked crossly.

"I know, I know," Millicent admitted, "it sucks, but what else can we do?"

"I know, you're right," Tracey conceded begrudgingly.

With nothing more to say, they made their way to the Headmaster's Office.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry, his body frozen, tumbled to the floor. The cloak caught under his stiff form and pulled away, partially exposing himself. He only had a few seconds to stare at the ceiling before the gloating face of Percy Weasley filled his vision.

"I knew there was a reason I never caught you, Potter," the prefect said gleefully, "but an invisibility cloak doesn't do much against a revealing spell, does it?"

Leaning over him, Percy examined the door to the Defense classroom, to discover that the handle was deformed.

"There's no one you won't humiliate, is there?" he asked, shaking his head sadly. "Even the fine teacher that gives his free time to you is not safe from your little tricks, is he?"

Pointing his wand at the door, he waved it slightly, restoring the handle and jam to its former state.

"Good as new," he declared, before looking down at Harry. "Don't worry though, Professor Quirrell is going to hear all about how little regard you have for him."

Harry grew even further horrified at the thought. How could things have gone so spectacularly wrong?

Some of his horror must have been reflected through his eyes, because the prefect hesitated at the classroom's entrance, before shaking his head.

"There are rules in place for a reason, Potter, and there are consequences for breaking them," he explained, before entering into the room. He lit the room with a wave of his wand, before levitating Harry into the room and placing him in a chair. He conjured lengths of rope which wrapped themselves around him, before un-doing the body-bind.

"Percy, listen, we have to get out of here," Harry immediately said, on the verge of panic.

"No," Percy disagreed, "Professor Quirrell deserves to know how his students repay his hard work."

"Quirrell killed Burbage," Harry whispered, shaking his head wildly, "and he's going to kill us if we don't get out of here!"

Percy looked like he was about to scoff in disbelief, but something in his face must have convinced the prefect otherwise. He froze for a moment, indecisive, before the choice was made for him.

The office door was thrown wide open, revealing a grim-faced Quirrell. He swooped out, wand held loosely at his side. Seeing Percy, the Defense instructor's face relaxed slightly.

"My apologies, Mister Weasley, the light startled me. What brings you-" the professor cut off his speech as he walked out further, and saw Harry trussed tightly to a chair. At the sight, he quickly brought up his wand, pointing it directly at Percy's heart.

"What are you doing with my student?" he demanded, eyes blazing. Percy weathered the gaze remarkably well, drawing himself upright.

"Potter was destroying the lock on the door, which would have locked you in here," he explained, trying to justify his actions. At the prefect's words, Quirrell flung a penetrating stare at Harry, before inexplicably smiling.

"Did he now?" the professor asked, his smile widening. "Well, there is a time and a place for jokes, but after curfew is not one of those times," he stated, before fixing his gaze on Percy. "Thank you for your assistance, Mister Weasley, but I'll take it from here. Please continue your rounds."

Percy hesitated for a second, giving Harry the opportunity to speak up.

"Yeah, why don't you get lost?" he added, silently urging the Gryffindor to leave. Percy, even if he suspected there was something wrong with Quirrell, wouldn't have a chance against the powerful Defense instructor. Better that he walk away, and get help if he figured out something was wrong.

Percy didn't reply for a moment, as he seemed to be studying Harry's face.

"Well, this is a prefect's responsibility," the prefect said slowly, after a moment's hesitation. "If it's alright with you, I would like to handle this one on my own."

Quirrell shook his head in response.

"I'm afraid it is not. Mister Potter's behavior as of late has been concerning, and it's about time that I've spoken to him about it."

"Dumbledore made me a prefect to serve this school," Percy promptly replied without missing a beat, "and I must insist upon completing my assigned task."

"Are you refusing a direct request from a professor," Quirrel asked, his voice dropping an octave, becoming dangerous.

"Please, just go," Harry pleaded, "I really want the chance to apologize to Professor Quirrell." Why wouldn't he go?

Percy shook his head.

"I want to escort you back to your dormitories after, to ensure you go straight back. You have a reputation for staying out after curfew."

"So be it," Quirrell said, bringing his wand sharply, before any of them could react. At his movement, two high pitched screams rang out within the classroom. They were abruptly cut off following a large cracking sound in the middle of the room.

"What was that!" Percy demanded, his wand drawn.

"Two house-elves," Quirrell replied casually, motioning toward the middle of the classroom. As he did, the mangled forms of two dead house-elves materialized into view, limbs splayed in every direction. "Dumbledore has had these two shadowing my every move this term, and I must say it has gotten quite annoying."

Percy grew pale at his words, but jumped in front of Harry, wand drawn.

"What's going on?" Percy roared, his face red, his wand at the ready.

"Percy, get the fuck out of here!" Harry screamed helplessly.

The prefect ignored his warning, standing his ground.

Quirrell let out a mocking laugh at his defiance, and flicked his wand forward, causing the door to slam shut. Percy reacted instinctively, and flung a silent stunner at the professor. Quirrell let out a single sneer at the spell, before swatting it aside and jabbing his wand forward.

"Avada kedavra!"

Percy barely had time to blink before the killing curse struck home, knocking him backwards. He collapsed to the floor, lifeless, a look of surprise permanently etched onto his face.

"Why'd you kill him!" Harry screamed, his mind oscillating between terror and guilt. If only he hadn't antagonized Percy, he'd be alive today.

"I gave the boy ample opportunity to leave, but he chose not to."

Anguish tearing at him, Harry began to thrash against his bonds, but it was to no avail.

"I expected to do this at term's end, but you've forced my hand," Quirrell said, before rushing back into his office.

Harry, his arm forced to the side, wand in hand, tried to bring up his wand, but he couldn't move it enough to even get close to the rough bindings. Having no other option, he concentrated vastly, charging his wand. Sweating profusely, feeling time close in, he cast the overpowered bludgeoner.

The spell smashed through the seat of the chair, and split the crosspiece, breaking it in two. Feeling the chair begin to give, he thrashed madly, with all he had. The wooden chair resisted for a short moment, before falling to kindling, sending Harry tumbling to the floor. Bringing his wand up, he began to cast cutting charms wildly, cutting through the rope. In his haste, the second charm missed the rope and opened up his wrist. Ignoring the heavily bleeding wound, he ripped away the last of the rope.

Right as he jumped up, Quirrell reappeared, placing something into his pocket. He smiled slightly at Harry's escape, before withdrawing his wand. Harry quickly went to conjure a shield, but before he could, the wand was wrenched from his grasp. Struggling to maintain control, he put both hands around it, but Quirrell's disarmer struck him in the chest, blowing him back into the wall. He hit it hard and slid down the wall. Quirrell casually caught his wand and pocketed it.

Harry struggled to get up, but the Defense instructor moved quickly, grabbing him by the robes and lifting him up, slamming him against the wall. His teeth clicked together painfully at the contact as Quirrell pointed his wand at his head.

"Hold out your arm," he demanded, his voice allowing no argument. Terrified, Harry did as told. Quirrell moved the wand to his wrist, and began to knit the flesh. It hurt like hell, but he was barely aware of it, wondering why the man helped him.

"You're still useful to me, Harry," Quirrell said, as if reading his mind. "We're going to the third-floor corridor. You'll stay in front of me, and there'll be no sudden moves."

This bastard was going to use him as a hostage to get the Stone! Fuck that!

"I'm not going anywhere," Harry said defiantly, "you're going to have to kill me first."

He certainly didn't feel as brave as his words, but putting up a front was all that was keeping him from crying in frustration. Quirrell, rather than being angry, let out a mocking laugh.

"Small wonder you weren't placed in Gryffindor," he said, shaking his head slightly. "Nonetheless, I know that Hermione and Neville saw my condition at the infirmary, and probably rushed to tell you. They're on their way to the Headmaster's Office right now, aren't they?"

Harry sagged, knowing what was coming next.

"I'll let you in a little secret, Harry: Dumbledore's sharing a drink with his brother tonight in Hogsmeade. However, your friends don't know that. We can either go to the third floor, or I can meet your two little friends at the Headmaster's Office and kill them. The choice is yours, Harry."

"I'll go with you," Harry said, his heart heavy, tears of defeat running down his face.

I'm so sorry, Nicolas and Perenelle. You've been so good to me, and now you're going to die because of me.

"You made the right choice," Quirrell said as he marched Harry out of the classroom, treading carelessly over Percy's cooling corpse. The sight of a living being, treated so callously, temporarily banished Harry's grief away.

I'm going to find a way to stop him, Percy. Don't worry.

He just hadn't figured out how yet.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

"This really sucks," Tracey spat as she made her way too the Headmaster's Office.

"Yeah, it does," Millicent bitterly agreed. "I hate being so helpless when Harry's in trouble."

Instead of replying, the diminutive blond launched a bludgeoner into the wall in frustration. Millicent raised her eyebrows at the display, but chose not to say anything, continuing their walk in silence. Upon reaching the seventh floor, they heard the sound of a girl crying, quickly followed by cruel laughter.

Tracey motioned for her friend to stop, and they both applied whispered silencing charms to their feet. Their wands held steady, they approached the corner and slowly peeked around it.

Down the hall, Neville was trapped beneath a fallen suit of armor, the side of his head dark with blood. Standing next to him was Malfoy and his entourage, laughing and pointing at something on the wall that she couldn't really see. Peeking further, Tracey grew nauseous when the subject of their delight came into focus.

The crying girl was Hermione. She had been stuck to the wall somehow, apparently unable to free herself. From head to toe she was covered in a thick, grey substance, so much of it that the runoff had created a puddle beneath her feet.

"What's wrong with a little mud?" Pansy mocked. "Isn't your kind used to this? Caeni!"

A thick mud spurted out from Pansy's pointed wand, splattering onto Hermione's face, causing the muggleborn girl to close her eyes in self-defense. Upon the spell ending, amidst raucous laughter, Hermione opened her eyes. Her warm, brown eyes were glazed over, filled with a hopelessness that tore at Tracey's heart. It was a look of complete and utter defeat.

Rage began to well up within Tracey, painting her vision red. She may have had her differences with the bushy-haired witch, but Hermione admittedly was a kind person, and did not deserve any of this.

"Fucking inbred twats," she said under her breath, looking up at Millicent, where she saw her own rage reflected.

"Tracey, we have to make these assholes scream before we're through," the normally docile girl implored, her gaze hardened.

"You bet," she agreed, "but let's take the retard twins down first."

"Sure. One...two...three!"

On her count of three, they both launched their stunners. Malfoy, sensing the approaching spells, looked up to see the twin red spells arcing toward his slow, stupid bodyguards.

"Look out!" the blond yelled while drawing his wand, but Crabbe and Goyle's reactions were far too slow to avoid being felled by the twin crimson spells. The mammoth first-years fell like timber as Tracey's body-bind raced towards Malfoy.

"Fuck!" Tracey screamed in frustration as her spell bounced harmlessly off the Malfoy heir, who grinned in response. He was still using the fucking amulet!

"Try again," he mocked as he moved in front of Pansy and cast a cutter. However, the pug-faced girl's right arm was still exposed.

"Shield me!" Tracey screamed to Millicent, taking aim at Pansy's arm, and casting a bludgeoner. Millicent's shield popped into place immediately after, just in time to deflect the cutter into the wall. Her aim was true, the bludgeoner skimmed past Malfoy and struck

Pansy directly on the elbow. She let out a cry of pain as the impact knocked her backwards, dislodging her wand.

Tracey looked up just in time to see Draco's spell shatter Millicent's shield, driving the large girl backwards. She desperately tried to throw up another shield, but it came too late to prevent Draco's stunner from taking out Millicent.

"Now it's just you and me, mudblood!" Draco exclaimed, taking aim. He cast another shield-breaker, which Tracey dove under. Before Malfoy could fire again, she fired off a flare spell, which he was too slow to avoid.

"My eyes!" he yelled, covering them with his hands. Pressing her advantage, she scrambled to her feet and rushed him, tearing the pendant from his neck. As she did, Pansy reclaimed her wand, and fired off a quick reviving spell, before adjusting her aim. Tracey pounced on her immediately, downing her with a running tackle, sending her wand flying. Turning, she hastily cast a shield, deflecting Malfoy's body bind.

"Give me the fucking pendant!" he screamed as she felt her head wrenched backwards. Tracey thrust her opposite elbow back as hard as she could, which connected with Pansy's mouth with a loud crunch. The girl let out a shriek of pain, and Tracey felt the hands pulling her hair go numb. Thinking quickly, she dropped her shield and rolled to the side, Malfoy's shield-breaker punching into Pansy, who let out another groan of pain. Quickly, she threw the pendant around her neck, causing Draco's cutter to glance off her shoulder.

"How do you like not being able to hit anything?" she asked with a snarl, climbing to her feet, wand trained on Malfoy. He merely smirked and stepped aside as a charging Goyle rushed her. Panicking slightly, Tracey began to cast, but Goyle got there first, tackling her to the floor. Tracey felt something break in her chest, filling it with white-hot pain as he put his entire weight on top of her. Desperately, she brought her knee up, directly into his groin, causing him to gasp in pain and roll off her.

Agony coursing through her chest, she forced her way out, where Malfoy was reviving Crabbe. She quickly stunned Goyle, and then launched a revival spell at Millicent. Before she could do more, a more potent pain stabbed her in the chest, causing her to double-

over with a cry of anguish. What the fuck had that gorilla done to her?

Forcing her way through the pain, she brought her wand up, but Crabbe took a hold of her robes first. He swung her by them, smashing her off the wall hard. She collapsed to the floor, stunned from the impact. Crabbe began to tear away the pendant, but a stunner caught him in the back, felling him. Moving her head slightly, she saw Millicent with her wand thrust forward, directly in Malfoy's line of fire.

"Petrificus totalus!"

Right before the spell left his wand, he was pulled down, causing the spell to hit the floor harmlessly. Looking down, she saw Neville had successfully freed his arm, and forced Draco's spell wide. The blond boy barely had time to blink before Millicent's immense frame slammed into him, sending both him and his wand flying. Tracey, her strength leaving her, quickly levitated the suit of armor off Neville.

Eyes full of fury, Neville used his new found freedom to pounce on Malfoy's prone form, landing a vicious punch to his jaw.

"Please-" was all Draco had time to get out before Neville, crying and sputtering to himself, took the suit of armor's helmet and smashed it into the blond boy's face, breaking his nose with a snap. He began to scream with pain as Neville got up and began to kick him in the ribs, yelling incoherently with every kick. After the fifth kick, Millicent restrained him.

"Hermione might want a turn," she said, motioning to their shaking friend. Millicent had already let her down and had begun to siphon the mud off her body. Neville's tortured expression cleared, and quickly turned to horror as he beheld Hermione's terror-stricken face.

"I'm so sorry, 'Mione," he said as he joined Millicent in clearing all the mud off of her. Hermione's breath was shallow, but more concerning was her lack of response to them, the wild look in her eyes, the fear. Neville, clearly wanting to comfort her, wrapped her in a tight embrace.

"It's going to be okay," he whispered into her ear, rubbing her back. "We're here now, they can't hurt you anymore."

She fought for a second, before melting into him, sobbing uncontrollably.

"What did I do!" she screamed into his shoulder. Neville, having no answer, just began to rub small circles in her back, continuing his assurances. Hearing movement to the side, Tracey saw that Malfoy, snuffling blood through his nose, was reaching for his wand.

"Look out!" she yelled, but Hermione had already seen the movement. The muggleborn girl rushed over and kicked the wand aside before stomping mercilessly on his hand, breaking several bones before he drew the hand back to his body. She immediately sat on top of him, and launched a vicious open-handed slap across his face, shaking him by the robes.

"You like mud!" she screamed into his face, getting no answer but gasps of pain. Apparently dissatisfied with the answer, she grabbed his wand and shoved it down his throat.

"Have all the mud you want! Caeni!"

Draco tried to squirm away, but she put more weight on him, holding him in place. Mud began to flow out from the corners of his mouth, but Hermione had no intentions of stopping, casting continuous mud incantations for a solid thirty seconds. As Draco's complexion began to ashen, Hermione jumped off him, withdrawing the wand.

Draco rolled to his side, vomiting forth huge amounts of mud, mixed with trace amounts of blood and small white fragments. Once he was done, Millicent put him down with a stunner. The exertion catching up to her, Hermione passed out, her breathing ragged.

"She's in bad shape, guys," Neville said, concern deep in his voice.

"So is she," Millicent added, pointing to Tracey, who shook her head slightly.

"Hermione's worse," she said, the world beginning to take on a fuzzy hue, becoming less real. "Take her to the infirmary, Millie. Neville, you get Dumbledore. Harry...Harry still n-needs us."

"Are you sure you'll be okay?" Millicent asked, not looking convinced at all.

"I'll be fine," Tracey assured, smiling through the pain. "Just don't forget to stun the Parkinson cunt on your way out."

Tracey had more to say, but unconsciousness graciously claimed her, taking her away from the pain.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Wandless, his mind still trying to cope with Percy Weasley's murder, Harry continued his march through the halls of Hogwarts, closely followed by Professor Quirrell. His captor was silent, his only direction a gesture of his wand. With every corner Harry clung to the hope that they'd run into a professor, a thought which helped keep him calm, but their journey to the third-floor corridor was uninterrupted until standing before it.

"Get away from the door!" an elderly wizard ordered from within the confines of a portrait.

"Run along to Dumbledore before I destroy you," Quirrell said, before letting out a mocking laugh.

"How dare you? I was the fourteenth-"

The indignant wizard was cut off by Quirrell ripping the door of its hinges, and levitating it in the air, causing the wizard to eye it apprehensively. With a lazy flick of his wand, he banished the door at the painting. The wizard let out a yelp before disappearing from sight, seconds before the fast-moving projectile ripped through the canvas, knocking the portrait down.

With the painting destroyed, Quirrell brought his attention back to Harry.

"Keep moving, time grows short," the instructor said, motioning toward the doorway. His breath shaking, he did as ordered, entering the forbidden third-floor corridor.

Though Harry was in no mental state to appreciate it, Dumbledore had not been lying about the state of the corridor. Ten feet into the

hallway, the stone floor began to deteriorate, giving way to an inky darkness that the meager torchlight failed to penetrate. In front of the doors that lined the hallway stone rubble was piled high, making passage into the rooms impossible. Looking up, he saw that a thick, green vine had covered most of the ceiling and had begun to climb down the walls, covering some of the doors.

"Dumbledore spared no effort when he conceived these protections," Quirrell said quietly. "If not for my explorations into the depths of magic, I wouldn't have been able to bypass his precautions."

"Lucky us," Harry muttered in response.

Quirrell smiled slightly, before pressing his wand to his eye, causing it to glow with a blue light.

"It would appear Dumbledore's changed the protections yet again," he commented with a sigh, before reaching into his robes. He withdrew a small, white circle a foot in diameter and levitated it over the abyss, sticking it against the right hand wall. He then pulled out another circle, which Harry suspected was carved from bone, and did the same to the left hand wall. The circles placed, he began to wave his wand about in complicated, dizzying patterns, all the while chanting under his breath.

After about a minute, a high pitched whine began to emit from the twin bone circles.

"I'm going to ferry you across the gap," Quirrell said, turning to him. "The opening in the wards isn't large, so keep your arms by your side, unless you feel like dying young."

Harry nodded. He was unable to respond verbally, thinking that if he opened his mout he might just start screaming. Looking satisfied, the Defense instructor summoned a square piece of flooring from the darkness below.

"Get on," Quirrell ordered, "and remember: If you do anything wrong, I will kill your friends. Stay down, and don't get off until it stops."

Gulping, Harry stepped gingerly onto the flooring and crouched down. With him settled, the flooring began to slowly float down the

corridor. After twenty feet, the floor completely disappeared, leaving only a pitch black void beneath him. He gritted his teeth as the makeshift platform floated around the corner, gravity tugging gently at him. Once around the corner, the floor began to reappear, completely covered by thick tangles of vines.

A few feet later the platform stopped moving, prompting him to carefully step off. As soon as he did, the piece of flooring began to float back in the direction it came. Frantically, he racked his mind trying to come up with a method to stall Quirrell, but the environment wasn't accommodating. This section of the corridor was very short, and vines had covered every inch of it, in places it even appeared to split the stone walls. Looking around, he could barely make out any of the doors.

Furiously, he tried to concentrate on forming a plan, but short of killing himself, without a wand, he was helpless. For a moment he considered throwing himself into the abyss, before quickly discarding the thought. If it wasn't him being held hostage, it would just be some other unlucky student. Dropping to his knees, he desperately tried to tear sections of the vine away, to maybe camouflage the doors, but the greenery was as strong as steel. All he received for his efforts were painful blisters.

Still, he kept at it, only giving up as Quirrell began to turn the corner, standing nonchalantly atop the floating platform.

"It really is a good defense mechanism," he said, starting at the vines with a smirk upon his face.

"Not good enough, if you figured it out," Harry spat venomously, causing the professor to shake his head.

"Quirrell's knowledge of muggle plants was a fortunate coincidence. If not for the acidic enzyme, one would be forced to use fiendfyre, which would have run the risk of destroying the Stone."

The slip into the third person tense was not lost upon him. Why was he talking about Quirrell as if he was another person? Was it really Quirrell he was talking to, or was someone controlling him? Maybe his best chance wasn't to stop Quirrell, but to stall him and figure out what was really going on. Taking a chance, he addressed the instructor.

"If Quirrell's knowledge was useful, what was yours?"

The professor grinned humorlessly at the statement.

"It's difficult to stay in character constantly, as you discovered upon Dumbledore telling you that Quirrell was sorted into Hufflepuff."

"Who are you then?"

"All in good time," he replied, drawing a vial from his robes. It contained a dull yellow fluid which sloshed as he walked to a seemingly innocuous section of vine-wreathed wall. Uncorking it, he dumped the contents on the vines, which immediately began to smoke and shrivel, the lush green quickly fading to a dull grey. With a wave of his wand, he banished the dead vegetation away, exposing a previously hidden doorway.

"After you," the professor said, opening the door and motioning for Harry to enter. Keeping a wary eye upon the murderer, he did as ordered.

The room beyond was circular, perhaps fifty feet in diameter, brightly lit by torches placed in evenly spaced alcoves around the room's circumference. A walkway of stone five feet wide circled the inside edge, bordering a body of water, mere inches below the path. In the center was a small island, where upon a raised dais was placed a simple mirror.

"I suppose it is true that great minds think alike," Quirrell inexplicably said, smirking at the center island. With Harry off to the side, he recast the spell on his eyes, and began to peer around the room, walking its circumference as he did. Oddly, it almost seemed like he didn't know what to do.

"What's taking so long?" Harry mockingly asked, hoping to distract him. "Didn't you use those two Ravenclaws to figure it out?" It might be a bad idea to provoke Quirrell, but he had to resist somehow, to keep from feeling completely powerless.

"The two students didn't make it past the missing floor without tripping the wards," Quirrell said distractedly, continuing his

investigation. "If I didn't instruct them to tether themselves to the ceiling, they would have died."

"Break into their minds too?" Harry angrily asked, still bothered that this monster had sifted through his memories.

"I did. Those two had been caught in the third-floor corridor by Dumbledore earlier in the year, it wasn't inconceivable that the two lovers, accomplished Runes students for their age, to once again look for a secluded place for some adolescent debauchery."

"What about Burbage?"

"What about her? After my failed attempt to penetrate your mind's deepest secrets, and my Slytherin slip, I clearly needed a scapegoat to deflect blame."

"That's the only reason you killed her?" Harry exclaimed.

"Essentially, but I did also use her to scout this room out, before Dumbledore planted the vines."

"How? She used the Heretic's Declaration, so you couldn't have used the Imperius or a mind-control potion."

Quirrell grinned malevolently at his logic.

"I long ago traveled beyond the realms of known magic, Potter."

Something was definitely wrong here. If only he could figure it out...

"Why didn't you just have Professor Burbage steal the Stone?"

"There wasn't much time to investigate before Dumbledore arrived," he replied while making complicated wand movements.

Summoning his nerve, Harry let out a mocking laugh. Maybe the Stone was going to be safe after all.

"You have no idea how the Stone's hidden, do you?"

"Dumbledore is unquestionably a clever wizard, and his protections reflect that, but given enough time, I can crack them. Even in the

unlikely event that I cannot, however, I can always use your life as bargaining chip."

Harry swallowed heavily at the thought, feeling distinctly less brave, and went back to being silent. The casual mention of Harry's life as something material, a tool to be used vanished all his delusions of resistance.

Pointing his wand at the water, Quirrell began to wave it back and forth, but there was no effect. Apparently running low on ideas, Quirrell summoned the flooring he had rode in on and attempted to float it over the water. After only a foot, the enchantment faded, spilling the heavy stone into the water, where it was pulled down by an unseen force, disappearing into the murky depths.

He tried to stop from smirking, but it broke through for a moment. Maybe Quirrell wouldn't be able to break the defenses after all.

The defense professor saw his smirk, but did nothing but pull his unicorn and phoenix-feather wand from his robes. With unsettling dexterity, he began to twirl it between his fingers. Something about the movement was strangely familiar, but he just couldn't place it.

As if coming to a decision, Quirrell drew back his arm, and threw Harry's wand at the mirror. It hit with a dull thud, before striking the ground and rolling, coming to a rest at the edge of the stone island.

Though his wand had been out of reach before, now it was in a more literal sense. His illusions of stealing the wand back from Quirrell shattered, he deflated slightly.

How would he ever stop Quirrell now?

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

He was too late.

The familiar cold rage flowing to every corner of his mind, Severus Snape conjured a large cloth and draped it over Percy's cooling body. If he had possessed the time, he would have straightened the red-haired prefect's crooked horn-rimmed glasses and closed his wide, unblinking eyes, but formalities were a luxury he could currently ill-afford.

The one Gryffindor in the entire school that he respected, gone in a senseless act. Quirrell could have easily stunned him, but instead chose to kill, as if the fifth-year's life was of no greater worth than a flobberworm.

He understood the thirst, the drive to stop at nothing to achieve one's ends. The things he had done in the pursuit of power, positioned at the feet of the Dark Lord, would forever remain secret. The blood that stained his hands, much of it innocent, served as a constant reminder of the vow he took upon hearing of her death. Oh how he wished he had listened to her, but he had been too young, stupid and stubborn to admit just how right she was.

As he made his way to the third-floor corridor, the cold, dormant rage which he worked so hard to restrain began to poison his mind. The Dark began to build within him, causing his fingers to itch with need, begging for release. Even his sturdy occlumency barriers could do little to help.

"Just a little longer," Snape whispered to himself as he entered the corridor. The darkness within hissed angrily, but obeyed his wish. Quirrell certainly hadn't entered stealthily, seeing as the portrait Dumbledore had set to watch the door had been completely destroyed.

Upon seeing the white circles of bone attached to either wall, he sneered, almost unconsciously. Dumbledore hadn't exactly made it difficult to break in, but getting back out was an entirely different matter. With a flick of his wand he broke off a piece of flooring, and ferried himself over the abyss, over to the chamber containing the Stone.

Stepping off the platform, he quickly surveyed the situation from a hypothetical standpoint. Quirrell hadn't bothered to conceal his break-in, so he wanted Dumbledore to know he was there. Most likely he would propose a trade, Potter for the Stone. Percy had merely been a symbol, displaying that he had no qualms against murdering children. Quirrell needed Potter alive for when Dumbledore did show up, so he thought his chances of killing Quirrell without having to worry about Potter getting hurt were good, but if he did? Well, he did have a life-debt to dissolve.

Marching into the chamber, he saw that Quirrell was to his right, Potter standing slightly away from him. Hopefully the brat had the presence of mind to move once the spells started flying.

"Severus," the murderer welcomed, turning around. "I had hoped the Headmaster would arrive first, but hope once again is proven to be the sanctuary of the weak and foolish."

The Dark screamed for release, but Snape smothered it. There were still words to be exchanged before the Dark took control.

"You will release Potter to me," he commanded, "and in return I shall spare your life."

Quirrell let out a small laugh.

"Surely you didn't expect me to forfeit my bargaining chip so easily?"

"I did not, but I had thought that perhaps logic may penetrate your thick skull. If your time at Hogwarts was any indication, you are mediocre to the last degree, incapable of much more than killing defenseless children," he finished with a sneer.

"Oh, I've learned a few things since I left Hogwarts," Quirrell responded lightly. "Would you care to see some of them?"

That was all the provocation he needed. Like a dam torn down, Snape allowed the Dark to enter his mind, to seep into his consciousness. Thrusting forth his wand, he launched an impaling curse, which Quirrell blocked with a hastily conjured physical shield. Snape followed up with a Dark cutter, which cut through the shield like butter, but Quirrell sidestepped it, launching a Kinetic Hammer in return.

Where had he learned that? The Quirrell he knew wouldn't have been able to cast such a powerful spell. Acting quickly, Snape pointed his wand backwards, performing an inverse summoning charm at the wall. He was immediately jerked backwards towards the wall, but the reverse momentum robbed the Hammer of its power as it struck, hitting his chest with the force of a punch as opposed to blowing him through the wall. The Hammer absorbed, Snape canceled the inverse summoner, stopping him, but Quirrell had already thrust his wand into the floor.

Before Snape could react, he was nearly knocked off his feet as the ground beneath him began to heave and split. Off balance, Quirrell withdrew his wand from the ground, canceling the localized earthquake and fired a wide column of flames from his wand. Inches from his body, Snape froze the flames before rolling backwards and jumping up, on level ground again. Concentrating fiercely, he shot a bolt of black lightning at the Defense instructor.

Quirrell quickly transfigured a piece of loose rock in front of him into a goat. The lightning changed course, seeking out the nearest living thing, detonating the goat in an explosion of blood and giblets. Before the gore had splattered back to the ground, Snape fired off a waking nightmare hex, which Quirrell made no effort to block. After striking him, instead of screaming in terror, he merely let out a malicious grin, causing Snape to falter slightly.

What was this? That spell had caused strong-willed wizards to go insane within minutes. What had happened to Quirrell? Sensing his unease, Quirrell shot a blasting curse at him, which Snape merely swatted into the wall, showering the room with bits of rock and dust. Dodging a cutter, Snape summoned a Coil of Darkness. Brandishing it like a whip, he snapped outward with the four-foot length of pure black energy, dissolving the spell in midair.

Twirling his wand in concise patterns, Quirrell shaped the stone debris around him, where it coalesced into a large horizontal column. The construct complete, he banished the column, running as he did so. Barely moving, Snape lashed out with the coil, neatly splitting the stone column. The stray pieces flew wide, one splashing into the water, the other striking the wall with a colossal bang.

Quirrell, still running, advanced, his wand drawn. Snape quickly lashed out to his left, but his adversary merely slid under the ebony whip, now on his inside. Snape tried to pull the whip back, but his wrist was grabbed and twisted, forcing him to his knees. Canceling the coil, Snape tried to break the grip by rolling forward, but Quirrell merely tightened his grip, and used his other hand to grab the back of Snape's head. Before the Potions Master could react, he was smashed face-first into the stone wall. His nose broke with a crack, spilling blood down his face, but unfazed, he used his other hand to pull his spare wand from his ankle holster and cast a concussion hex, knocking Quirrell back slightly. Seizing his opportunity, he

jabbed forward with his main wand and struck the Defense instructor with an energy sapping curse.

Undaunted, Quirrell struck back with a blasting curse, which Snape just barely avoid, twisting his body violently to the left. Quickly, he recast the Coil of Darkness, and advanced on the murderer, blood roaring in his ears, the Dark within screaming with exhilaration.

It was time to end this.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry's eyes widened as the spell Snape barely dodged rocketed towards him. He began to backpedal, but didn't have the time to get far. The errant spell collided with the wall with the power of a bomb, spraying dust and stone everywhere. The force of the blast lifted him off his feet and tossed him like a rag doll, directly into the water.

He sunk deep into the water, but immediately popped up to the surface, before he could even start to kick. Why had he been pushed up but the flooring had been sucked down?

Grateful either way, he began to swim toward the island in the middle, desperate to get away from the two combatants. He was amazed to note that not only was the water surprisingly warm, but it wasn't holding him back. Wearing bulky, saturated robes, it should have been hard to swim, but he was cutting through the water just as easily as if he were wearing swim trunks. Reaching the island, he quickly pulled himself over the stone lip. See his holly wand, he scrambled over to it, picking it up quickly. Turning around, he saw that Snape and Quirrell were still battling one another.

Quirrell, waving his wand furiously, was banishing chunks of rock. Snape, wielding a strange black whip, was snapping the projectiles out of the air, the dark energy reducing the stones to dust. Though the Defense instructor kept a furious pace, it appeared that he was becoming drained, reaching the end of his endurance.

Without warning, Snape cancelled the whip and merely sidestepped the nearest chunk of rock. He jabbed his wand forward, then down, diagonally, circled it and jabbed it forward again, a spell erupting forth at every movement. Quirrell dodged the first four, but he was

too slow to avoid the last, a dark red one with black mottling. The spell struck his hip in a glut of blood, spinning him around.

Seizing the opportunity, Snape snapped off another chain of spells, each one hitting home, mercilessly tearing Quirrell apart. The fourth spell struck the crook of his elbow, detonating the limb in a crimson spray. Swaying dangerously, blood spurting from the stump of his shoulder, as well as the multiple holes punched in his torso, the final spell collided with his right knee. It tore through the flesh like a chainsaw, severing the rest of the leg, spilling Quirrell to the ground.

Upon hitting the ground, a black, opaque mist poured forth from his body. It was visible for only a moment before disappearing into the floor. Quirrell immediately let out an agonized scream, his eyes frantically darting around, brimmed with terror.

"What's going on!" he screamed at the approaching Potions Master, his voice full of terror.

Harry was immediately reminded of the orphanage, where a fragment of Voldemort's soul had compelled him to do unspeakable things. Dumbledore had immediately recognized his possession for what it was. Had Quirrell been in the exact same situation, helpless to do anything while forced to do terrible things?

"Stop, something's not right!" Harry screamed at the top of his lungs. Snape, his expression murderous, didn't acknowledge his warning. Bearing down on Quirrell, he raised his wand. Hadn't he seen the black mist?

With horror, Harry saw green light began to gather at the tip of Snape's wand. No, this couldn't happen! What if Quirrell was really innocent?

Desperate to stop him, he hastily cast a stunner. The spell struck the Potions Master in the back, dropping him like a stone. Harry immediately jumped back into the water and swam over to the walkway, pulling himself up quickly. Upon gazing at the defense instructor, he let out a strangled cry.

Quirrell looked like he had been through a grinder. Tendons and gristle trailed from the stumps of his crudely severed limbs, his heart continuing to pump blood to them. With every breath, air escaped

through a ragged hole in his chest with a ghastly sucking sound. Yet, he was still alive, but not for long unless Harry did something.

Leaning down into the spreading pool of blood, he spoke rapidly to the dying man.

"I want to help you, but I don't know how."

Quirrell's eyes, which had been rolling around in his head, moved towards his voice, gaining some sort of awareness. He opened his mouth, as if attempting to speak, but spasms wracked his body as he began to cough violently, spraying forth a bloody mist.

"B..body b-b-bind," he managed to whisper, before falling to another coughing fit. Harry quickly cast the body-bind. Immediately, the flow of blood slackened to a trickle, but didn't stop completely. Standing back up, he realized that he may have bought Quirrell a few more minutes, but without help, he was going to die.

Desperate to help the innocent man, Harry jumped up and sprinted out the door. If he hurried, he might be able to get Madam Pomfrey in time to...

Mere feet outside the chamber, he froze in his tracks, the abyss stretching out before him.

There was no floor. He was stuck.

"What the fuck am I supposed to do?" Harry screamed in frustration, falling to his knees. There was no way he could cross the chasm, he couldn't levitate himself like Quirrell and Snape could. He was completely on his own.

The realization sobered him slightly, dulled the panic's edge. Bearing down mentally, he got back to his feet. He couldn't just sit around. If he didn't think of something, an innocent man, who had been possessed just like he had, was going to die. Wracking his brain for something, anything, he walked back into the chamber and looked around, a bright shine in the center catching his eye.

The mirror.

"Of course!" Harry yelled, diving into the water. He cut through it quickly, pulling himself onto the stone island and quickly inspecting the mirror. It was as high as the classroom ceilings, with an ornate gold frame. Standing on tips of his toes, he went to inspect the transcription at the top the frame, but seeing it wasn't English, he quickly moved on. He needed the Stone to save Quirrell, what was the mirror's secret?

Moving his eyes downward, he regarded his reflection. Without warning, his own determined frown became a smile, and his reflection moved, placing something into its pocket, at which Harry felt a weight in his pocket. Letting out a gasp of surprise he reached in, feeling a small, rounded object. Hope building within, he pulled the object out.

It was the Stone! A small, bright gold object, it was about the size of an ostrich egg, but not nearly as smooth. Bumps and concave depressions lined its surface. Holding it tightly, wondering how he got it, he jumped back into the water and swam back over to Quirrell. Moving quickly, he held the Stone over the dying man, noticing that a golden liquid covered his hands. Was that the elixir?

Holding the Stone over Quirrell's chest, he squeezed down as hard as he could. A thick golden liquid immediately began to seep from his fingers, dripping upon the wound site. The wounds did not close, but began to scab over rapidly, stopping the flow of blood. As quick as he could, he applied the elixir to all of Quirrell's wounds, completely stopping the bleeding.

Upon finishing, he let out a deep sigh of relief and placed the Stone back in his pocket. Quirrell was still in really bad shape, but at least now he might live until help came. With a heavy sigh, Harry admitted to himself he was going to have to face his Head of House's wrath, and wake up Snape. He couldn't just sit around and wait for help to come. Pointing his wand at the unconscious man, he hoped for the best, resigning himself to Snape's rage.

"Ennervate."

Snape's eyes flew open upon being awoken, and he immediately jumped up, wand pointed directly at Harry's heart.

"You almost got me killed, Potter," the Potions Master spat, his face drained of all color. "Of all the irresponsible, idiotic things you've done, this is by far the worst. If you were a little older, I'd make you regret ever being born."

"What was I supposed to do?" Harry asked angrily. "You were killing an innocent man."

"Once again, you soar to uncharted heights of stupidity, Potter. Was it this innocent man that murdered Percy Weasley?"

"I was fucking there, Snape! I saw him die!" Harry screamed, losing all patience. "If you were paying attention, you would have seen the black shape escaping his body. He was fucking possessed!"

"When I want to hear nonsense, I'll seek out Professor Trelawney!" Snape snarled. "Professor Dumbledore and myself already ruled out possession as a possibility."

"I know that, sir," Harry said, lowering his voice. "I asked Quirrell about that, and he said something about being outside the rules of magic."

Some of the anger departed from Snape's face at his statement, to be replaced by skepticism.

"What exactly do you think you saw, Potter?" the Potions Master asked slowly.

"As soon as Quirrell fell, a black cloud left his body, but...it wasn't like smoke. It looked – almost solid."

"Are you certain?"

"Yes, I'm sure," Harry said slowly, restraining the urge to snap at Snape. "After he kidnapped me, he was talking like Quirrell was someone else. He said he wasn't Quirrell, but wouldn't say who."

"Very well," Snape said with a sharp nod. "You were probably imagining things, but if your far-fetched story is actually true, we need to see the Headmaster immediately."

"It was real," he insisted, but Snape ignored him, turning to Quirrell. After waving his wand a few times over the still man, he shook his head.

"These wounds are beyond my skill to fix," the Potions Master said, before levitating Quirrell into the air. He moved the comatose man out of the chamber and into the hallway, setting him down for a moment. Pointing his wand at the piece of flooring he had ridden in on, he expanded its size two-fold, levitating Quirrell's body onto it.

"Get on," Snape ordered. "I'll deactivate the defenses; wait for me at the other side."

Harry nodded sharply and got onto the large piece of stone. At once, Snape began to move the platform back towards the corridor entrance. Right before the platform turned the corner, the wards dissolved with a bright flash, clearing their passage. Harry sighed with relief, the last obstacle to escaping the corridor gone.

Ten feet from the other end of the corridor, without warning, the platform dropped several feet. The sudden movement jostled him, almost throwing him off the platform. Heart racing, he clung tightly to the sides.

"What's going on!" Harry yelled, his voice echoing around the hallway. Instead of an answer, the platform began to float back towards the chamber.

"What are you doing, Snape?" Harry screamed, desperate for an answer. Did the thing that got Quirrell get Snape as well? Thinking quickly, he reached into his pocket and withdrew the Stone. Taking aim, he flung the Stone as hard as he could. His aim was true, and the golden object soared through the doorway, landing in the hallway outside the corridor. No way was he going to let the Stone be taken from him.

Drawing his wand, he crouched down on the slowly moving platform as it turned the corner, prepared for the worst.

There was no one there.

Puzzled, Harry kept his wand raised. What was going on here?

Gently, the platform touched down upon the vine-wreathed floor, barely disturbing Quirrell's prone form. Harry stepped off cautiously with his wand pointed out in front of him. Where was Snape?

"Right here, Harry Potter," Snape said, stepping out of the shadows. Twirling his wand idly between his fingers, he wore a wide smirk. Harry felt terror rip him at the movement, as it was the exact same twirl he had seen Quirrell use throughout the year.

Whatever had been in Quirrell, was now in Snape. But what the fuck was it? An evil spirit?

"Time grows short, so I'll only ask kindly once before things become unpleasant," Snape said menacingly. "Where is the Stone?"

Harry, his worst fears confirmed beyond any shadow of a doubt, expelled all traces of panic from his brain. A pleasant cool descended over his mind, putting everything into perspective. Snape, or whatever was controlling the Potions Master, thought he still had the Stone and Harry couldn't let him think otherwise.

"You can't have it," he said, shaking his head wildly and backing away from Snape.

"I gave you your chance," Snape replied, advancing towards him. Harry quickly conjured a shield and held it behind him as he turned, running toward the chamber. Entering it, he chanced a look back. Fear began to rise within him as he observed that Snape had his wand pointed forward, but was not casting. Whipping his head back, he prepared to dive into the water, but a small section of wall sprung out like a tentacle, catching him in the chest. Like a fly he was swatted backwards, landing hard upon the stone floor. Hitting hard he let out a weak, desperate gasp, his chest in fiery agony.

"Too much Gryffindor indeed," Snape said with an amused tone, apparently taking pleasure in Harry's thrashing upon the floor. Reaching down, the Potions Master picked Harry up off the floor and threw him into the wall. He reached out his hand to soften to blow, but his wrist bent backwards with a flare of pain, quickly followed by the rest of his body. Harry barely had time to collapse before Snape was leaning over him, his expression cruel.

"Where is the Stone?"

"Fuck you!" Harry screamed in response, using his agony to fuel the yell. He would not betray his guardians!

Snape, his expression unchanging, responded by picking Harry up by his robes. He felt the Potions master take a hard grip on his robes before he was spun around roughly, head-first into the stone wall. The blow sent his glasses flying, and dropped him to the ground, dazed. Vaguely, he could feel warm liquid running down his face, but it felt unimportant compared to the apparent bombshell that had been detonated between his ears.

"Are you ready to tell me where the Stone is?" Snape asked.

"Never."

Snape's mask of indifference cracked slightly at Harry's answer, revealing a hint of frustration. The Potions Master brought his wand down, its tip pointed directly at Harry's chest.

"Crucio!"

Pain beyond comprehension flooded through his body, as if every inch of his body was being skewered by hot knives. His screams echoed throughout the chamber, so intense that Harry thought his throat would tear. After several seconds, though to Harry it seemed much longer, Snape ended the curse. Free from the unimaginable pain, Harry lay on the ground, gasping and twitching uncontrollably.

"I take no pleasure in torturing you," Snape said, shaking his head slightly, "but I will do whatever it takes to find out where the Stone is. That was but a mere taste of the Cruciatus Curse. You will break under its strength eventually, so why not spare yourself some unnecessary torment and just tell me now?"

Harry wanted nothing more than to cave in, but a deep, driving determination from within balked at the thought. Snape thought that he was going to fold? Fuck him. The Flamels gave him a second chance at life; he was not going to betray them over some pain. In too much agony to reply, Harry opted to shake his head violently.

"Very well," Snape replied, raising his wand again. "Cru-"

Abruptly, Snape cut off the curse and jerked Harry to his feet, pressing a wand to his temple.

"How kind of you to finally show up, Dumbledore!" Snape yelled.

Harry momentarily forgot his pain and terror as the tall form of Albus Dumbledore walked into the chamber, wearing robes of red and white stripes, his blue eyes aflame with a cold fury.

"How could I pass up the opportunity to converse with an old student, Tom? Or Voldemort, if you prefer," the Headmaster said lightly, his voice betraying none of his anger.

Voldemort? The Dark wizard that had possessed him back at the orphanage, had nearly gotten him killed, was back?

Snape initially looked furious at Dumbledore's words, but he quickly masked it with a wide smile.

"The reckoning shall be yours, Dumbledore, for foolishly thinking that I, the greatest sorcerer this world has ever seen, had been defeated."

"Returning to Hogwarts was mistake, Voldemort. Surely you realized that the Stone's protections were too strong to penetrate."

"Oh, I beg to differ," Snape replied with a smirk. "I saw Potter acquire the Stone several minutes ago. So much for your vaunted protections, old man."

"If that is indeed true, then why have you taken to hurting an innocent, defenseless child?" Dumbledore asked, his voice full of fury. "Shouldn't you have already snatched it from him?"

Snape's grin faltered almost imperceptibly at the question.

"Potter does not have the Stone on him any more. I'm not sure what he did with it, but unless you manage to find it for me, I will kill your precious chosen one."

"I will not hand you the key to eternal life, Voldemort," the Headmaster sorrowfully replied, shaking his head.

"That is unfortunate," Snape said slowly, honest regret seeping into his voice. "Potter could have accomplished great things had his supposed protector been willing to save him. So be it."

At Snape's words, Harry tried to tear himself away, but his captor was too strong. Staring directly at the tip of Snape's wand, he was helpless to do anything but watch.

"Avada kedavra!"

Frozen with fear, he couldn't react as Snape's eyes went wide, shocked that no spell had been cast from his wand. Harry was suddenly jerked away violently and punted across the water, landing safely on the island. Turning, he saw Dumbledore redirect his wand, pointing it at Snape.

"You will leave Severus Snape's body right now, or I shall destroy you," Dumbledore threatened, his voice allowing no room for compromise.

Snape let out a cruel, mocking laugh.

"The only thing you'd be able to destroy would be your precious Potions Master, as long ago I ascended beyond the mortal plane."

"You cannot triumph against me, Voldemort," he replied, shaking his head. "

"Overconfidence has been the fall of many great wizards, Dumbledore. While I admit that this body is rather ill-equipped compared to my own, perhaps today the odds will be on my side. Besides, I lose nothing by trying."

Snape immediately jabbed his wand forward, shooting forth a bolt of black lightning from it. Dumbledore conjured a cone of white light, dissolving the Dark spell. Dropping the cone, he twisted his wand before thrusting it forward. A silver spell spiraled through the air, which Snape barely blocked with a conjured grey shield, the impact knocking him backward. Pressing onward, Dumbledore lashed out with a wide arc of white light. Snape leaped over the bright spell, retaliating in mid-air with a killing curse. The Headmaster effortlessly avoided the green curse, swiping his wand upwards. Upon hitting the ground, Snape continued to descend, sinking up to his chest.

The Potions Master began to struggle against the transfigured stone, but it sealed around him, trapping his body. Waving his wand in intricate patterns, Dumbledore began to conjure bright yellow rings of light around Snape's exposed torso. As the bands of light began to close around Snape, he swiped his wand around in a circular motion around his body. The ground around him immediately exploded outward, spraying stone fragments in every direction.

All of the flying rock lost its momentum upon flying over the water, but Dumbledore was forced to conjure a translucent blue shield. All of the rock shattered upon contact with it, dropping harmlessly to the ground. Out of the dust Snape stepped, his wand drawn, rapidly chaining Dark curses together. Like a whirlwind Dumbledore waved his wand, directing rocks into the paths of the incoming curses, taking every single one out of the air, until the atmosphere of the chamber was thick with dust.

"Surely you can do better than this, Tom," Dumbledore said calmly, as if completely untaxed by his efforts. Instead of answering, Snape intensified his rate of fire, sweat standing out on his face. Dumbledore, seemingly effortlessly, raised his wand upward. With a mighty roar, the floor between the two combatants rose high into the air, absorbing the remaining spells. Snape abruptly thrust his wand forward, casting a large grey spell. It ripped through the thick stone like it was tissue paper, before detonating it with a sound resembling a bombshell.

Dumbledore quickly raised his wand, freezing the expanding mass of stone rubble in mid-air. For a moment the stone was suspended, frozen in time, before he sharply jerked his wand downward. At his command, the rubble became translucent and rushed toward Snape. The Potions Master slashed his wand viciously, disintegrating half of the clear objects, but the rest converged upon him. Like a gelatinous mass they covered him, freezing him in place. Snape's expression was one of infinite hatred, but he was suspended in place, completely helpless.

Harry, praying that it was finally over, scanned Snape's prone form. Straining his eyes, he saw a black shape begin to materialize near the bottom of Snape's dark, frozen robes. With horror, he saw it begin to rush towards the Headmaster.

"Look out!" Harry screamed, but Dumbledore had seen it. Raising his wand, he conjured a shield composed of a radiant white light. The black mist began to smoke profusely upon colliding with the shield, and a high pitched scream filled the room. The sound cut through his head like a knife, causing him to clap his hands over his ears. Keeping focused, Harry saw the black mist disappear into the floor, leaving no trace behind. Slowly removing the hands from his ears, he looked towards Dumbledore.

"It is over?"

The Headmaster nodded.

"Voldemort doesn't have his horcrux anymore, and will not risk destruction at my hands. He's gone for now, Harry. Rest, you've certainly earned it, I'll take care of everything else."

Harry, exhausted from the fighting, pain and emotional turmoil of the night, slumped to the ground softly.

"It's finally over," he whispered to himself, before the world faded from view.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry awoke slowly, pressed into a warm, comfortable place. He savored the comfort, contrasting it favorably to his most recent memories. Opening his eyes a crack, he quickly shut them again, the brightness doing his eyes no favors.

Without warning he felt slight magic wash over his body with a pleasant, light touch.

"It is safe to open your eyes, Harry," a kind, familiar voice said, giving his hand a comforting squeeze.

Slowly he opened them, wanting to trust the kind voice but preparing for the worst. Looking to his right, he saw that it was Perenelle that was holding his hand.

"It is good to finally see you awake," she greeted, a wide smile upon her face.

"Though you certainly didn't hesitate to draw out the drama a little," Nicolas said from his left, wearing a slightly cautious grin.

"I'm really glad to see you both," Harry said happily, squeezing Perenelle's hand back tightly. He'd never been so glad to see his guardians, but felt uneasy with the gathering moisture at the corners of their eyes. Looking to lighten the mood, he addressed the alchemist.

"Even if it did take an infirmary trip to get Nicolas out of the house."

At Harry's statement, Nicolas relaxed slightly, regaining his typical carefree expression.

"Well, I had run out of books to read," the alchemist said with a shrug. At the statement, Perenelle reached over and swatted her husband on the arm.

"You will stop being a twit for five minutes," Perenelle ordered, her eyes narrowed.

"I will?" he asked, raising a single eyebrow. His wife sighed before turning to Harry.

"Do you think we could get away with killing him, Harry?"

"Probably," he replied, "there's not a court in the world that would convict us."

The statement prompted laughter from the three wizards. As it died down, Harry began to look around the immediate area. A white curtain had been drawn across the entire room, giving them rudimentary privacy. On the two bedside tables, chocolates and cards had been piled high, stacked almost perilously. Oddly enough, the majority of them had a great deal of green on their covers. Were most of them from his fellow Slytherins? Did they actually care about him?

"A large number of students have dropped by the infirmary to send you their best wishes, especially members of your own House," Perenelle stated, apparently noting his surprise.

"How long was I out?"

"You have been here for three days," she softly replied. "You were hurt quite badly, but thankfully you should be completely recovered within the week."

At her information, guilt and sadness flooded through him. Here he was, joking as if everything was normal, and Percy Weasley hadn't just been killed by his parents' murderer.

"Percy and Quirrell will never be okay though," Harry said sadly, "and it's all my fault."

"No no," Perenelle denied, squeezing his hand reassuringly. "You have no reason to regret anything."

Harry shook his head furiously.

"If I hadn't pushed Percy, made fun of him, humiliated him, he would have never followed me into the Defense classroom."

"That is untrue, Harry" Nicolas assured, reaching down and squeezing his shoulder. Harry, becoming incensed by their casual dismissal, shrugged the hand off.

"You don't get it," he said through gritted teeth. "If Percy wasn't there, he would have lived. It was my fault he was."

"No, no it is not," Nicolas insisted. "People clash and have disagreements every day. It happens. The only one at fault is Voldemort for casting the killing curse that took the life of that poor boy. The way you handled yourself...Harry, I – I couldn't be prouder of you."

"But I didn't do anything!" Harry declared, punching the bed in frustration. "I couldn't save Percy or Quirrell. Dumbledore did everything."

"You did a great thing," Perenelle said, shaking her head. "You saved three people's lives, Harry."

"Uh – what?" Harry asked ungracefully, totally caught off-guard by the comment. Who had he saved?

"If you had not discarded the Stone," she patiently explained, "Voldemort would have fled Hogwarts immediately, the means to his resurrection secured. Due to your quick thinking, that never happened. We can continue to take the Elixir of Life."

"More importantly, though," Nicolas said, drawing his attention, "you saved an innocent man from certain death."

"Quirrell's alive?" Harry asked softly. He had done what he could for the man, but hadn't thought there was any possibility of the Defense instructor surviving.

"Indeed he is. His recovery will be long, and he almost slipped away a few times, but thanks to you, he will survive."

"Um, is he here right now?"

"He is," Nicolas confirmed, "and is awake, if you are up for seeing him."

Harry answered in the affirmative, wanting to speak to the Defense instructor. It was strange to think that the man he saved was not the one who had taught him so much during the semester, but he was anxious to meet the real Quirrell.

Slowly he got out of bed and was pleased to discover that he felt pretty good, aside from slight discomfort in his chest. Both Flamels were prepared to support him as they exited his bedside area, but he was able walk under his own power. Looking around, he saw that there were several other closed curtains around the infirmary, much more than he would expect.

"Why are there so many people in here?" Harry wondered aloud.

"There were...a few other injuries the other night," Perenelle said carefully. Feeling slightly apprehensive, he began to question whom, but Nicolas, slightly ahead of them, addressed the drawn curtains closest to them.

"Are you ready to see him, Quirinus?" the alchemist softly asked. A quiet voice answered in the positive. It was the same voice he had become familiar with during the semester, but its tone was off,

lacking slightly in confidence and force. Stepping through the curtain, he forgot Perenelle's worrying statement completely.

His former Defense instructor was in horrible shape. Bandages covered his entire torso, tattooed with crimson spotting. Where his right arm used to be was only a short, bandaged stub, red staining the white gauze. The blanket was pulled up to his waist, but he imagined his leg looked similar to the arm. However, Harry saved the majority of his inspection for Quirrell's eyes.

Even though he knew it had been Voldemort controlling Quirrell, well, he wasn't just going to accept it on good faith, considering the horrible things that had been done. Within Quirrell's grey, shameful eyes, he saw no trace of the monster that had murdered his parents. Voldemort was beyond such a human emotion.

It really was Quirrell.

"I'm so sorry, professor," Harry said, saddened by what had become of Quirrell. Despite his obvious discomfort, Quirinus managed a small smile, and held out his left hand. Slightly flabbergasted, Harry could only stare at it for a moment, before shaking it hesitantly.

"Thank you very much, Harry," Quirrell said. "I owe you a debt of gratitude beyond measure."

He tried to stutter a reply, but was unable to keep from staring at the stump of the arm. Was he really deserving of thanks? Quirrell, apparently sensing his unease, shook his head lightly.

"An arm was a small price to pay, considering I walked away with my life. Besides, one of Dumbledore's friends is an ex-Auror whom has also lost some limbs, and has agreed to show me how to adjust."

"Can't they just fix your arm with magic?" Harry blurted out, immediately regretting it. Obviously not if they hadn't already.

"While Healers can do many amazing things," Nicolas explained, sparing him any further embarrassment, "they cannot reattach or regenerate limbs severed by Dark magic."

At his answer, Harry stares at the blood blossoms beneath Quirrell's the bandages. Did that mean...

"The wounds are still fighting all treatment methods, but they're slowly losing ground against the healing powers of the Stone. Once again, if it wasn't for your quick thinking, I'd be dead, Harry."

"Well, um, you're welcome," Harry said lamely, uncomfortable at the praise. Thankfully, Quirrell smiled understandingly.

"I just want to thank you for saving me, but now I believe I need to get some rest. Besides, your friends here probably want to see you."

"Well, I hope you get better quickly," Harry said, his mind still processing Quirrell's final statement. Why were his friends here?

Bidding Quirrell farewell, he followed the Flamels outside the confines of the curtained area, and addressed them.

"What was Quirrell talking about? Why are my friends here?"

Nicolas sighed deeply at the question.

"You have had far more trouble here at Hogwarts than you have let on, have you not?"

"What happened to my friends?" Harry asked again, deeply concerned for them. Sure he'd have to face a reckoning of sorts for his behavior, but couldn't that wait?

"Your friends were involved with a violent confrontation with Draco Malfoy and his friends. Everyone involved was hurt, some seriously," Nicolas explained, dropping the previous subject for now. "Hermione is still resting, but Tracey is awake now."

Not needing to wait for a reply, the Flamels led him to a curtained area across the room, drawing back the curtain for him.

"We'll wait outside for you," Perenelle said. Harry thanked them before entering, touched that they were respecting the privacy of him and his friends. Within, Tracey was sitting up in bed, reading a book.

"What now?" she snapped without looking up from her book. Upon looking up, her annoyed expression changed into a smile which almost glowed.

"It's nice to see you stopped being lazy and got your arse out of bed," she remarked, her kind tone betraying the harsh words. Despite her flippant tone, her eyes shone with genuine happiness.

"At least I'm actually walking around instead of sitting around complaining," Harry teased, keeping their talk light. He was thrilled to see his friend again, but making it a big deal between them...well, would have been just weird, right?

Tracey shrugged.

"Pomfrey doesn't really want me moving around too much."

"What happened to you?" Harry asked, sitting on the side of her bed.

Slowly, she recounted the night's events, starting with Daphne's message and ending with Hermione throwing Malfoy's curse back in his face. All throughout the story, Tracey's expression got angrier, matching Harry's emotional response exactly. The humiliation piled upon Hermione was unspeakable, horrible and evil. Malfoy. This was the little fucker than he was supposed to reconcile with? For fuck's sake, he handed Malfoy back the tool that got his friends seriously hurt!

Her story complete, she stared angrily at the drawn curtain. After a few moments, her expression softened, and she regarded him with sympathetic eyes.

"What happened to you, Harry?" Tracey asked softly.

As he opened his mouth to relay the terrible events, his mind conjured forth an image of Percy splayed on the ground, his lifeless eyes staring skyward. He bore down mentally, banishing the image, but its effect lingered.

"I-I-I'm sorry Tracey, but I...I just can't think about it right now," he apologized, his voice shaking. She replied by taking his hand in both of her own, squeezing it lightly.

"It's alright," she assured. Her touch was pleasant, the warmth of her smooth skin soothing him slightly.

"How bad is Hermione?" he asked after a moment of silence. Sighing, she took back her hands and ran them through her hair distractedly.

"Hermione...she almost couldn't breathe while stuck to that wall. If we hadn't stopped those motherfuckers..." she trailed off, not wanting to finish the thought.

"She's going to be okay, right?" he hesitantly asked.

"In a few days, she should be completely healed," Tracey quietly replied. "Physically, anyway. Other than that...I don't know, Harry. Put yourself in her place: Would you ever want to come back to Hogwarts after that? I mean, imagine having to see Malfoy every single day, knowing what he did to her?"

"No, I wouldn't," Harry said, all the while thinking that if it happened to him, he would have killed the little fucking poof, "but won't Malfoy get expelled for this?"

Tracey snorted, crossing her arms.

"Do we go to the same school? You know, the one where Malfoy planned an attack which almost got you killed, and faced no punishment? Face it, Malfoy's father almost runs this school. Malfoy could kill a muggleborn in front of Dumbledore and nothing would happen."

Harry was taken aback slightly at the genuine anger in her voice. He had thought that some of her vitriol for the wizarding world had faded, but her recent experience seemed to have brought it back.

"Are you coming back next year?" he asked quietly.

"I'm not sure," she admitted. Harry's first impulse was to implore her to come back, but he stopped himself. Did he even want to come back? The man that sent Voldemort's horcrux to him practically ran the school, his son had almost gotten him killed twice and Voldemort had found him here. Wouldn't things be better than Beauxbatons?

Sighing loudly, he realized he had some serious thinking to do this summer.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

"Saltwater taffy."

At Nicolas' words, the gargoyle slid aside, revealing the entrance to the Headmaster's office.

"Is that some variety of muggle sweet?" Perenelle asked.

"Yeah it is," Harry confirmed.

"Sounds rather dreadful," she commented as the stairs began to move, bringing them upwards. Harry nodded in agreement. He vaguely remembered trying it once at the orphanage, and not really liking it.

Dumbledore sat behind his desk, scratching away with a vibrant blue quill. Upon seeing them enter, he placed the quill down and rose. Eyes twinkling, he made his way over to Harry.

"It does my heart good to see you up and about again, Harry," the Headmaster declared.

"It feels good, thanks for saving me in that chamber."

"I am deeply sorry you had to go through that ordeal," Dumbledore apologized, the twinkle in his eyes fading. "That was something you should never have been exposed to."

To his surprise, at the statement, Perenelle's lips upturned in an almost unconscious snarl, as if she wanted to berate Dumbledore. Had Dumbledore and his guardians been fighting while he was out?

Seeing her expression, Dumbledore let out a heavy sigh and pushed up his glasses off the bridge of his nose.

"As I said before, I'm deeply sorry, but Voldemort's present incarnation defies conventional magical detection. I had no reason to believe that two house-elves would be insufficient."

"Before he killed Percy, he killed both of the elves," Harry said, speaking up. "He...he knew they were there the entire t-t-time."

His voice hitched slightly at the end, the memory of the night taunting him. Why couldn't have Percy just taken that night off?

"Please, sit," Perenelle urged, pulling him over to one of the chairs in front of the Headmaster's desk. He sat down heavily, trying to force the memories out of his mind. Perenelle took the seat to his right, squeezing his hand comfortingly, while Nicolas conjured a large purple chair for himself. All traces of her previous animosity had vanished.

"Is there anything you need?" Nicolas asked, being more useful in practical manners than emotional ones.

"No, I'm fine thanks," Harry quickly answered, shaking his head. "How are the twins and Ron doing?"

"It has been extraordinarily difficult for them, as the Weasleys are a close knit family. They have been sent home for the semester, to be together in this trying time."

"Do they blame professor Quirrell?"

"There is still some resentment," Dumbledore admitted sadly, "but I explained to them that it was a vengeful wraith which possessed him and made him do those terrible things."

"You didn't tell them it was Voldemort?" Harry asked incredulously.

"I did not. As much as the Weasleys deserve to know the truth, Mr. Weasley, a Ministry employee, would lose his job if he began to claim that Voldemort killed his son. Rest assured - I do plan to tell them eventually."

"Well, why not tell the Ministry?"

"If it went to the Wizengamot, they would convict Quirrell on sight if he claimed to have been possessed by Voldemort. No legislative member would want to be the first to admit that that Voldemort could really be back. The official story is going to be that Quirrell was possessed by a vengeful spirit during his travels across Europe."

"Oh, um...okay," Harry said flatly, not really sure who was going to buy the flimsy story. "What if Voldemort tries to come after me again?"

"Professor Flitwick and I have modified the wards surrounding Hogwarts. Though Voldemort's wraith-like form is unlike anything I have ever encountered, he was clearly vulnerable to Light fire. The particular spell has since been reproduced in the Hogwarts wards, assuring that he will never be able to return to school grounds."

Perenelle shook her head at the explanation.

"As I said before, if there is any way to get in, he will find it. He has two Death-Eaters on school grounds on a regular basis."

"As much as I don't like Snape, he did protect me from Voldemort," Harry admitted. He hated defending the cruel greaseball, but when it mattered, Snape had been on his side.

Perenelle did not seem swayed, instead choosing to press her lips together, as though forcing down any retort. Harry did see her point. Snape had no idea it was Voldemort possessing Quirrell. Would things have been different if Snape realized his former master was right there?"

Almost as if reading his thoughts, Dumbledore spoke up, his expression grim.

"I have the utmost of trust in Severus. He has left Voldemort's service for good."

"So I take it that Snape's constant verbal abuse on Harry is a sign of affection then?" Nicolas asked with a frown, unable to help himself.

Dumbledore sighed, and took off his glasses to rub the bridge of his nose.

"The rivalry between Severus and James Potter had dire consequences, which linger to this day. Unfortunate though they might be, they did contribute to saving Harry's life."

Immediately making the connection, Harry spoke up.

"Voldemort tried to use a killing curse on me last night, but it didn't work. Why not?"

"When Severus was a student here, your father saved his life, creating a life-debt. Upon your father's untimely death, the unfulfilled debt was passed down onto you."

"Um, but wasn't it Voldemort who really tried to cast it?" Harry reasoned.

"Yes," Dumbledore confirmed, "but he was using Severus' magical core to do so. Upon being called upon to kill a person to whom a life debt was owed, his magical core refused."

"So let us assume that Snape has truly forsaken Voldemort," Nicolas said, leaning forward. "What about Lucius Malfoy? He almost murdered Harry, and now he has a large say in his education. How can you be sure he would not immediately return to service for Voldemort if called upon? For all we know, Voldemort might have already made contact."

"I am not sure at all," Dumbledore admitted, "as matters outside Hogwarts are beyond my control."

"And what about his power here?" Harry added. "Do you know what Draco did to Hermione?"

"I do," Dumbledore confirmed, his eyebrows contracted in disapproval. "Tracey, Millicent and Neville all gave me their accounts of the night's events."

"And? Are you expelling him and his friends?"

Dumbledore let out a heavy sigh, which Harry immediately took for a no.

"That's ridiculous!" he exclaimed. "How is Hermione ever supposed to feel safe here again?"

"Please, you misunderstand me," Dumbledore assured. "I have every intention of expelling not only Draco, but his main accomplice, Pansy Parkinson. However, they also both sustained severe injuries

during the incident, and their parents had them moved to St. Mungo's."

"So?" Harry impatiently demanded. Why did that matter?

"They have taken medical leave from Hogwarts, and are not likely to return this term. I am unable to officially expel a student who is not currently attending Hogwarts."

"So you have to wait until they come back?"

"Sadly, I do. If and when they do decide to return for the fall term, I will do everything within my power to have them expelled, as I wholeheartedly agree that Miss Granger's torment was absolutely unacceptable, and will not be tolerated at this school."

"But you can't guarantee it, can you?"

"I cannot, unfortunately, but am reasonably confident Lucius has no other avenues he can pursue to acquit his son."

"My friends never would have gotten hurt so badly if you hadn't forced me to apologize to Draco," Harry spat bitterly. If Draco didn't have the pendant, Tracey could have beat him easily.

"Forgive me, but I believed an offering of peace would diffuse this volatile situation."

"My friends had to pay for your mistake!" Harry exclaimed angrily. "Hermione might never be the same!"

"As I said before, I clearly misjudged the situation, Harry, but I urge you to keep in mind that diplomacy should never be abandoned should it fail the first time."

"Albus," Pernelle began, her voice heavy, "we have been friends for a while, but I find myself losing confidence in you. You failed to mention to us that Harry was having severe difficulties within his own House."

Harry's cheeks began to burn at her words. The Flamels had not been happy that he had been hiding things from them, as they had

made clear during the seemingly endless walk to the Headmaster's Office.

"And I explained that, mistakenly, I assumed Harry had informed you of the incidents."

Perenelle's eyes narrowed at Dumbledore's claim, clearly not buying it. She began to rise, but Nicolas placed a hand on her shoulder, as if urging her to reconsider. Almost reluctantly, Perenelle sat. Sighing, Nicolas turned back to Dumbledore.

"I am sorry, but it would appear that you no longer have Hogwarts under control. Unless there are major changes over the summer, we may be forced to withdraw Harry from your school."

This was exactly why he hadn't told the Flamels!

At the statement, Dumbledore leaned forward, his gaze earnest.

"You are both more than justified in your reasoning, as your points are legitimate, but have you thought to consult Harry on the matter before making such a declaration?"

"We had a deal, Harry," Perenelle said softly, apparently slightly bothered by Dumbledore's words.

"I know we did," he admitted, "but I...I don't like the idea of going to another school."

"Beauxbatons is a fine school, I assure you," Nicolas stated.

"Yeah, it's probably fine," Harry said, "but I can't speak French! How can I learn if I don't understand the language?"

"You made progress over the winter," Nicolas pointed out, "but there are translation charms which could pose a solution. However, I admit Dumbledore was right, we should have spoken to you first, but would you really want to stay here, considering all that has happened?"

Harry, cognizant of the three pairs of eyes upon him, chose his words carefully.

"Um...I don't know. I mean, I have close friends here, and I don't really want to leave them. Except for Snape, all the professors here are great, and I'm learning a lot. Yeah, some things went really wrong here, but I had a lot of good times."

Harry was silent for a moment, before going into the negatives.

"But, it was dangerous with Draco around, I always had to be ready. And the Board! I defend myself from Draco, and I have to explain why?"

Harry got angrier thinking about it. It was all so stupid, did they really think he would have went along with being their mascot. Glancing around the room, his gaze singled in on the Sorting Hat.

"And then there's that," he said, pointing to the enchanted object. "If I leave here, will it ever tell me the combination? It said it wouldn't, but maybe if I was here longer, it would change its mind."

The Headmaster shook his head.

"The Sorting Hat has been adamant that it will never willingly reveal the combination, but as headmaster of this school, I have final say over all magical objects bound here, and wish to simplify the magnitude of your decision."

"Headmaster, I urge you to reconsider!" the Hat declared, the rip in the brim opening wide. "There are horrors within his mind best left forgotten."

"That decision should be left to Harry," Nicolas said. His wife didn't look nearly as convinced, glancing at the hat with trepidation.

"Is this something we really want to do? If the hat says to leave it alone, that it is dangerous, should we not protect Harry from it?"

"No one is going to dispute that the knowledge within Harry's head could be dangerous," the Headmaster stated, "but we've all seen the quality of his character, time and time again. I've already taken the liberty of acquiring the combination from the Sorting Hat."

Harry's eyes flew open at the statement. They finally had the code?

"Very reluctantly," the artifact bitterly added, "rest assured, no good will come of this."

"I respectfully disagree. If one of us were to supervise Harry during the opening of the vault, then we would be able to protect him from any of these supposed horrors that reside within."

"And by 'one of us', you mean 'you'," Perenelle added. "You are by far the most accomplished of us in the mental arts."

"I am," Dumbledore admitted, "but of course the decision would be Harry's."

Breaking from his paralysis, Harry was beyond caring about who would accompany him.

"Thank you so much for finding it!" he exclaimed. Finally, he was going to have his past back!

Perenelle held up her hand.

"Wait a moment, Harry. I will not have you rush into this. I value the advice of the Sorting Hat, as it does not make idle claims. If you and Dumbledore do indeed enter the depths of your mind, you are to follow his every order without hesitation. Can you do that?"

"Yeah, definitely!" Harry quickly answered, nodding enthusiastically. If Dumbledore said he had to wear a girls' Hogwarts uniform, he'd agree if it meant getting inside his mind. "Can we do it right now!"

"You most certainly may not," Perenlle decreed. "You still need your rest after your recent ordeals. If Madam Pomfrey clears you tomorrow, then perhaps."

Harry, jubilant he was finally going to get answers, didn't even bother fighting her on the subject. He absolutely couldn't wait to see what was beyond the vault.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

"Have you ever seen this place before?"

Gazing up at the sprawling house before the two of them, Dumbledore shook his head at Harry's question.

"I have not, but I must say that it is quite idyllic. Would you mind terribly if I took a look around before we proceed into the basement?"

"Not really," Harry replied with a dismissive shrug. He was impatient to finally bypass the vault, but didn't want to rush the Headmaster, especially considering that without his help the code to the vault would have never been found.

Together they walked through the house. As Harry had originally discovered during his explorations following the orphanage incident, a few of the rooms were suspiciously devoid of objects, as if they had been hidden from sight. It seemed like a fair assumption that at least some of the mysterious objects were in the vault. Dumbledore seemed most impressed by the two-story library, despite its abundance of empty space on the shelves, as if some of the tomes were in hiding.

"This is most impressive, Harry. It is an oddity for a muggle home to possess a library of such size."

"Yeah, I figured that," he replied, "but I was more surprised I could read the books. How could all of that information fit in my mind?"

"It is no easy feat," Dumbledore admitted, "since as keen as you are, it would take decades to devour this much information. Most likely the memories of the books were placed within your mind."

"That...doesn't sound easy."

"It is not, but your mind has never ceased to astound me, Harry. The mental alacrity required to forge the defenses around your mind surpasses even my skills."

"Really?" Harry asked skeptically.

"Indeed. While I am admittedly accomplished in the mental arts, it cannot exactly be described as my main area of expertise."

The answer surprised Harry. With the regard the Flamels and others heaped upon Dumbledore, it seemed odd to think of someone else doing anything better than him.

"Can we leave here now?" he asked, getting slightly impatient. He was at a loss to explain it, but whenever he entered the library, a great sadness descended upon him.

"I take it the library inspires a negative emotional response?" Dumbledore assumed, holding the door for him. Instead of answering, Harry increased his pace, scrambling out the door. Once out, he leaned against the wall, giving a sharp nod.

"I don't know why, but in the library, and one of the bedrooms, I feel a...like, a huge sadness."

"This is not unheard of. Wizards who have tried to purge themselves of painful memories find that certain places and objects will always have a vague sort of recognition attached to them."

"How? Aren't the memories gone?"

"From one's mind, certainly. However, although I may be incorrect, I believe that the soul itself actually possesses memory. Even if the mind is purged, the soul does not forget the atrocities of yesteryear."

Harry was quiet following the Headmaster's explanation. He had seen horrible things in the past two years, things that he didn't think he'd ever forget. Had he seen even worse things before he arrived at the orphanage?

"Can we go downstairs now?" he asked. Why keep wondering about the past when the answer was behind the vault?

"Certainly," Dumbledore replied. "Lead the way."

Harry did so, leading them down the stairs, into the finished basement. Like an indifferent sentry, the vault door sat before them. For what had seemed like years, he had pounded the door, yelled at it, thrown things at it, all to no avail. Now he had the code, and there was nothing it could do about it. He had won.

"Before we enter, it is imperative that you stay behind me and off to the side, Harry. The Sorting Hat warned that great danger lay beyond this threshold, so if we are to enter, I will be taking the lead, ensuring our mutual safety. Can you handle this?"

"Yeah, definitely, sir," Harry replied, getting into position. As eager as he was to find out about his past, it still scared him. What had been important enough to cause him to bury his past?

"Splendid."

Dumbledore stepped to the door and placed his hand on the circular combination lock. Having been instructed as to how muggle locks of this sort worked, Dumbledore quickly input '2-1-8', causing the lock to release with a click. Heart hammering in his chest, Harry spoke up.

"Th-thanks for all everything you've done for me."

"You are quite welcome, Harry," Dumbledore replied, giving him a final smile, before turning forward and pushing the door open. Wand drawn, the Headmaster stepped through.

Waiting, Harry's hands shook with anticipation. It was finally going to happen!

"The first room appears to be clear," Dumbledore yelled from the vault. "You may enter."

Well, this was it. Cautiously, Harry moved toward the entryway. Upon turning to face the first room, he froze. What the fuck was going on?

Directly in front of him was the familiar black door, framed by white walls. Expecting the evil voice to speak at any moment, he unconsciously began to backpedal.

"Harry, what's the matter?" Dumbledore asked, clearly alarmed by the expression on his face.

"I-I-I always see this door in my nightmares! There's...something really, really bad on the other side."

"What is it?"

"There's always a voice that laughs at me, before the door opens and black flames come out...and they burn everything!" Harry quickly explained, backed all the way to the basement stairs. No fucking way he was dealing with this.

"Please, listen to me for a moment, Harry," Dumbledore pleaded, holding out his hand. "There is nothing within your mind that can hurt you, Harry. It's yours. A simple flame-freezing charm would prevent anything from happening."

"No it wouldn't!" he insisted, shaking his head wildly. "It's not normal fire, it's like it's alive."

"Nonetheless, I promise you that nothing can happen to you here," the Headmaster assured, beginning to wave his wand in intricate patterns.

"Don't open the door!" Harry screamed.

"Even if I wanted to, I would be unable," Dumbledore replied. "It's locked, and magically resistive."

"So we can't get in?" he asked, slight relief creeping into his voice. As much as he wanted to know about his past, he wanted to avoid the black flames even more.

"It is possible I might be able to force it open, but perhaps we should investigate this room further before resorting to more brutish tactics."

At Dumbledore's explanation, he began to walk back towards the room. As long as they didn't have to mess with the door, he thought he might be able to handle looking around the room. Well, as long as he had Dumbledore to protect him, anyway.

Entering the room, he saw that it looked exactly as it did in his dreams. The lone exception was that where the expanse of blank wall had been, was now the vault. Why had it been different in his dreams? And how could he see this place in his dreams, but be locked out?

Walking to his left, he saw a red spot upon the far wall. Moving closer, he observed that it was a red push-tack. Upon seeing it, his heart skipped a beat. During his longest dream of the room, he had pushed the tack back into the wall after taking the envelope...

Looking down, he saw it. The smooth white of muggle paper, his name in black ink, it lay upon the floor. He threw a paranoid glance over at the door, expecting it to begin rattling, but it continued its silence. He quickly picked up the envelope, questions racing in his mind. Raising it up, he called for Dumbledore.

"What is it, Harry?"

"In my dream, I put the tack in the wall, and dropped the letter. Just like it is now. How is that possible?"

Dumbledore looked rather surprised at the news.

"I cannot say, Harry. Perhaps the letter will provide some insight."

Taking a deep breath, Harry dug his fingers beneath the sleeve, tearing open the envelope. Within were two sheets of paper, written on lined muggle paper, the writing small and cramped.

Harry,

Throughout history, revolutionaries have always faced resistance from those who would wish for civilization to stagnate. Jesus was crucified for challenging the established religious doctrine. Galileo died confined to his home, labeled a heretic for challenging the church's unscientific view on man's role in the universe. This heavy price, the curse of knowledge, has often been the sacrifice an individual has been forced to make when intending to change the world.

You, Harry, have carried this burden ever since we rescued you from the flaming wreckage of your parents' home, as we were unwilling to leave such a special, gifted child to the cruel fate that awaited him. We taught you our ways, as you are also one of the chosen ones, and our secrets became yours. Sadly, we have many enemies, who could sweep clean the earth if in possession of the knowledge our minds hold.

For that reason, whenever our minds are compromised, we erase our pasts; locking them behind walls which even the most skilled Legilimens hasn't a chance of breaching. If you are reading this, then our worst fears have come to pass, and such an invasion has occurred. While no doubt you're often regretted the decision to erase your past, we urge you to take solace in the fact that you did the right thing, the virtuous thing. Take heart, for as hopeless as things may have seemed, you are closer than you realize to answers.

We have a sanctuary established, impenetrable to our many enemies. When you are ready, send us a letter with the symbol drawn on the back of these pages attached. We are hidden to owls, and it is only through use of this sigil that they may find us. Much we still must keep secret, but at very least we can begin to the process of restoring your memories. Until then, Harry, be safe.

Looking up from the unsigned letter, he was incredulous. That was fucking it? That was all he was going to get? Turning it over, he examined the symbol. It looked like complete gibberish to him, being four closely spaced figures with apparently random curves and angular lines. What the fuck was this gibberish?

"Would you mind if I read the letter?" Dumbledore asked, apparently curious.

"No, it's useless anyway," he crossly replied, handing the letter over, though he was more than tempted to burn it. He still couldn't believe it. What was so important that he couldn't even catch a glimpse into his prior life?

As Dumbledore read the letter, his temper began to cool. It had been stupid to consider burning the letter...but he had just expected so much more. Well, whoever they were, at least they promised answers.

The Headmaster, finishing the letter, handed it back wordlessly. The Headmaster didn't exactly seemed thrilled with its contents either, but as opposed to anger, there was distrust in his face.

"Have you ever seen that stupid symbol before?"

Dumbledore shook his head.

"I have not, but the symbol isn't very important. It just has to be relatively obscure to work as a beacon to let owls through the protections."

"They didn't say much, did they?" Harry said bitterly.

"They did not," Dumbledore agreed, his eyes turning cold. "I already have my misgivings about them. Knowledge that powerful, that dangerous, has no business being in the hands of the young. It strips them of their childhood, jading them to this world prematurely. The curse of knowledge is aptly named."

"I don't know," Harry said with a shrug. "I hate being kept in the dark. I don't really care how bad something is, or how big it is, I think it should be my decision make. Didn't you say that I appeared to be far too advanced for my age?"

Dumbledore's expression thawed slightly.

"I did, and I am certain all of your professors would agree. You were clearly trained at a young age."

"Well, isn't that a good thing? If I didn't have early magical training, how else would I have defended myself in Slytherin? Doesn't that show that sometimes having a lot of information at a young age is a good thing?"

"I respectfully disagree," Dumbledore said, shaking his head. "Some...some things are better left unsaid, Harry."

His opinion stated, Dumbledore began to exit the room. Trailing behind him, Harry couldn't help but think that the professor knew far more than he was letting on, and was talking about something specific.

What exactly was it though?

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Standing atop Hogwarts, at a window within the Owlery, Harry looked out over the school. Times like these, where he could just be alone, were few and far in-between. He certainly appreciated the

support of his friends and the Flamels and acknowledged that he would have had a much harder time without them. Just sometimes, it was nice to be by his lonesome. It helped to organize and simplify the complex thoughts within his head.

Between his hands, he idly passed a thick envelope back and forth. With no signature of any sort attached to the letter deep within his mind, he had been unable to name a recipient. His only option had been to painstakingly transcribe the symbol, so that the letter could go through. What happened after that was out of his hands. Should he even send the letter at all though?

While still slightly bitter about the complete lack of information he had received, more practical issues had occurred to him in the weeks after exiting the dreamscape. Did he want the burden of secrets so terrible that people would destroy their pasts to protect them? He certainly had enough things on his plate right now anyway. Between discovering that Voldemort was back, the decision to stay at Hogwarts and the Ministry, was this something he even wanted to deal with right now?

With a slight snort, he called Hedwig down from the rafters. Like he was going to leave a stone unturned. Leaving questions unanswered was just something he didn't do. She landed gracefully on his shoulder, snapping the owl treat he flipped up to her out of the air.

"How are you doing, girl?" he asked, stroking her soft tail feathers. She gave a lazy hoot in response, almost seeming to glare at him with her amber eyes.

"I know, I know," he said with a laugh. "I haven't given you much to do lately, but I need an important message delivered."

Hedwig straightened at his words, chest thrust out proudly. Lightly, he held up the letter. She gave him an affectionate nip on the finger, before taking the letter and flying off. He watched her disappear into the skyline, losing her when she was no bigger than a speck. Wondering who would be there to get the letter from Hedwig, he left the Owlery, making his way back towards the Great Hall. The end-of-year feast was just about to stop, although it wouldn't be the joyous occasion he assumed the feasts usually were.

As expected, Percy's death had rocked the school. Several familiar faces had gone missing, their parent having pulled their students from Hogwarts. According to the official story, an evil spirit had possessed Quirrell back in Albania, and had attempted to infiltrate Hogwarts. The story didn't make a great deal of sense, but the public had accepted it, clamoring for reform at Hogwarts. He didn't think that evil spirits would care very much about Ministry regulation, but what did he know?

"Run along, you" an unpleasant voice wheezed, breaking him from his thoughts. Looking up revealed the scowling face of the Hogwarts Caretaker, Filch. "Why aren't you at the feast."

Harry shrugged. The hunchbacked man had scolded him a few times for tracking mud into the castle, but that was the extent of their interaction.

"I'm on my way."

"You best hurry. I've heard stories about you, Potter."

"Who hasn't?" Harry muttered.

"You shouldn't wander around by yourself, boy, especially at night. Mark my words: bad things are coming to Hogwarts."

"Uh, like what?" Harry asked, slightly unnerved by the ancient caretaker.

"Nevermind that, you just keep a careful eye out," the caretaker replied. Shaking his head, he departed, leaving a flabbergasted Harry. He and Filch had never exchanged any real words before. Why the warning now? What did Filch know? Or was old age catching up to him?

No answer available, he continued down to the Great Hall to join the feast.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Was this the last time he would board the Hogwarts Express?

Harry couldn't help but ponder the question as he sat in the compartment with his four closest friends, aboard the crimson trains hurtling through the English countryside.

"What does everyone think about Puddlemere's chances at the League Cup?" Neville asked the rest of the cabin. "I mean, they're in fourth, so they're still in it."

Millicent laughed at his question.

"I don't really think there's a great British and Irish League following in this compartment," she said, motioning to the other three members of their group, all of whom had grown up in the muggle world.

"Oh, yeah," Neville said quietly, blushing slightly.

"But Falmouth is probably just going to crush everybody else, so I wouldn't get your hopes up. Sorry."

Neville groaned loudly at Millicent's statement.

"Please, anyone but Falmouth."

"If there's any more Quidditch talk, I'm going to start talking about the EPL," Tracey threatened.

"EPL?"

"English Premier League, Neville. It's a muggle football league, and it looks like Newcastle United is headed for another disappointing season"

"Wait, that's not that boring game where muggles run around and kick a white ball, is it?"

"Why yes, that would be it. What do you say Harry, you think Manchester Uni-"

"You win, you win!" Millicent interrupted, throwing up her hands. "No more Quidditch talk."

"Thank you," Tracey replied, leaning back with her hands laced together behind her head.

"That was pretty low, even for you," Harry said with a grin.

Tracey shrugged.

"I guess-"

She was interrupted by a heavy knock upon the door.

"Doesn't a closed door say 'leave me alone'?" Tracey wondered.

"Apparently not to these guys," Harry said, going to the door and opening it. On the other side was a slightly older Gryffindor, with a large frame wiry brown hair, flanked by two fellow first-years. Dean and Seamus, was it?

"Potter," the older Gryffindor sneered.

"Um, you," Harry replied.

"What are you doing here, McLaggen?" Neville asked, getting up from his seat. Judging by the unease in his friend's voice, he wasn't a big fan of McLaggen.

"Shut up, traitor," McLaggen sneered, "we're here to speak to Potter."

"How dare you?" Hermione accused, jumping to her feet.

"Easy, he's friends with a murderer, just like you."

"McLaggen, is it?" Harry asked. "You can either get to the point or you can get the fuck out," he spat.

"Nice language, Potter," Seamus added with a scowl. His friend Dean just looked embarrassed to be there, and was averting his eyes to the scene.

"You better watch your back next year, Potter," Cormac threatened, apparently expecting to scare Harry. Judging by his reaction, he did not expect the entire compartment to burst into hard laughter.

"What's so fucking funny?" McLaggen demanded, his face turning red.

"Are you channeling Malfoy and his two goons?" Harry asked, the laughter winding down, "since they said the same exact thing to us at the start of term."

"We're not slimy Slytherins like you, Potter!" Seamus yelled, his ears turning red.

"You sure about that?" Tracey asked. "How much did you have to beg the Sorting Hat to keep you out of Slytherin?"

"Shut up!" the sandy-haired Gryffindor yelled back, his face turning just as red as his ears.

"What? Did that hit too close to home?" she asked with a snort.

Seamus lunged forward, but Dean moved quickly, easily restraining him with his much larger body.

"Come on guys," the large black boy pleaded. "Really, what are we doing here? Let's just go back."

"We came here to tell Potter he's not going to get away with killing Percy," Cormac said angrily, glaring at the group.

At his statement, everyone in the compartment drew their wands and pointed them straight at Cormac.

"What the hell is your problem?" Millicent demanded.

"My 'problem' is that there's a murderer walking free," McLaggen replied, staying stoic despite the five wands pointed directly at him.

"Give me one reason we shouldn't blast you into next week," Tracey snarled, her wand shaking slightly.

"Because you'd be helping a killer."

"How fucking stupid are you? Dumbledore even said during the feast that it was an evil spirit. What, do you think an eleven year-old can cast Unforgivables?"

McLaggen snorted.

"No one believes that stupid story. Percy always said that something was wrong with Potter, that he was dangerous. Even the Daily Prophet said he was a Dark wizard."

"If you're dumb enough to believe anything the Prophet says, then there's no point arguing with you. Get the fuck out of our compartment. Now," Harry ordered, narrowing his eyes.

"There's a war coming," McLaggen declared, ignoring Harry, "and you better figure out what side you're on."

As he said this, his eyes wandered over to Hermione and Neville.

"I'm on Harry's side," Neville immediately pledged.

"Figures. What about you, Granger? The Slytherins humiliated you."

"You don't know what you're talking about," Hermione said coldly. "It was Malfoy and his friends, and if you didn't notice, they're probably not coming back to Hogwarts. Go find some other easily-misled first-years."

"Fine," Cormac replied angrily, "but you better watch yourself. Next year it's going to be open season on all Slytherins. Especially for Potter and his friends."

"It's going to be open season on crimson and gold git if you don't get the fuck out of our compartment," Tracey snarled.

"That's really scary coming from a half-pint like you," McLaggen said with a roll of his eyes, before turning back to address his Housemates. "Let's go."

The trio left swiftly. Dean sent an apologetic look as he retreated, as if saying he was sorry for being a party to all of this.

"No offense to you two," Millicent said, looking at Hermione and Neville, "but there are some stupid people in Gryffindor."

"What were Crabbe and Goyle?" Hermione asked with a snort. "Scientists?"

"Dammit, you're right," Millicent admitted, chuckling to herself.

"You know guys," Harry said, addressing them all, "we really need to find a new compartment next year. This one is like a magnet for idiots."

"What do you think that was all about?" Tracey asked. "I mean, I've been following the Prophet, and they haven't tried to blame you...well, not yet, anyway."

"Yeah, that was really strange," Nevill added. "I think Cormac's said like two words to me all year, and now he's threatening us all?"

"I don't know," Harry admitted, "but next year at Hogwarts might be unpleasant for all of us."

"Well, for those of us that come back," Tracey finished.

"Wait, who's not coming back?" Neville asked, clearly confused by the turn of events.

"Come on, Neville," Tracey said tiredly. "You know what happened to Hermione. What would you do, if you were her, if you had to see Malfoy every day?"

"But he's not coming back, right?"

"Malfoy got away with planning an attack that almost left Harry dead. His father, Lucius, own this school. We all know that Malfoy's going to get off on this one too."

"Dumbledore can't expel students while out on medical leave," Harry spoke up, "but he says he plans to in the fall."

"And you don't think the Hogwarts Board is going to change the rules over the summer, Harry? Please."

"I know they don't care about me at all," Hermione said, breaking her silence. "I know it's almost impossible for a muggleborn like me to get a fair chance, but...but I don't care. Even though there's a lot of things wrong with the wizarding world, it really could be a wonderful place, but none of it's going to change if I don't do anything about it."

"Hermione," Tracey said, her voice exasperated, "are you going to change the entire world by yourself?"

"If I have to, yes," she replied crossly, "but it won't come to that. I have three close friends within prominent pureblood families, who will have a lot of say when they're older, and if my grades are good enough, there's jobs they won't be able to keep me out of. Besides, I'd rather take the world on by myself instead of just standing around saying how terrible it is, and not doing anything about it."

Tracey crossed her arms at the barb, but said nothing, sitting down hard. Hermione, not letting the issue go, advanced on the blonde girl.

"What about you, Tracey? Are you giving up?"

"I'm thinking about it," she crossly replied. "I don't even know why you want to stay here. Look at what they did to you!"

"Yeah, I haven't forgotten," Hermione said quietly, "sometimes it still keeps me up at night. And yes, I hate Malfoy and all his friends for what they did. But you know what? Back in primary school, I didn't have any friends. The only people who talked to me wanted something from me. When they thought I wasn't listening, I was the 'beaver', the 'know-it-all'."

Hermione stopped for a moment, wiping at her eyes, before continuing.

"As bad as that night was, I had people here who were willing to put themselves at risk to help me. Me, who's never had any friends. How could I ever leave that behind?"

Thinking about his actions, Harry began to feel guilty. He had been so focused upon what was best for him, that he never gave much thought to how his friends would feel. How could he leave them all behind?

Tracey shuffled uncomfortably, dropping her gaze from Hermione's.

"It's just nice to be accepted, isn't it?" Millicent said quietly, recognition in her voice.

"It's better than that," Neville spoke. "After being pampered by older aunts and uncles who thought I was too stupid and weak to do anything on my own, I finally have people that encourage me to do things, who try to help me. I don't know about the rest of you guys, but I wouldn't trade that for anything."

"What about you, Harry?" Hermione asked, turning to him.

Damn it all. All his reasons against coming back, which had seemed so cogent, now felt rather flimsy. Really, how could he leave his friends, who had so quickly jumped to help him stop Quirrell?

"I'm coming back," Harry said, not exactly knowing in his heart if it was true.

At the very least, he still had to convince the Flamels.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Confined to a small, one room cabin with that creepy bastard, Sylvia had to work to find things to occupy her time. Under normal conditions, her companion was willing to lend his wand for household tasks, but with little else to do, it helped to pass the time.

Without saying anything to her companion, she tucked the wicker basket containing their clothes under her arm. With her other hand, she unlatched the door, pushing it the rest of the way open with her shoulder.

"Take care not to wander far," he said from his place at the table, not bothering to look up. He was currently cutting out an article from the Daily Prophet, probably another piece to his book. The headline screamed "Board of Governors vows to solve prefect's murder!"

"I've been here for two fucking years," Sylvia replied snidely. "I know what the boundaries are."

"One would hope so. Still, I sense that you are considering leaving this place, which would be unadvisable."

"I can't imagine why," she replied sarcastically, "since the company's so great here."

Without waiting for a retort, Sylvia pushed her way out the door. She considered stopping and lighting his clothes on fire, but it would have been a useless gesture, since he could just restore them with his wand. If she buried his clothes, he'd just summon them. If she had a wand...well, that was an unproductive line of thought.

It really, really sucked being a squib.

At least the weather was nice. The sun shining upon her face was one of the few things as of late that had the ability to bring out her smile. Looking upon it, basking in its warmth, she knelt down. Setting the basket next to her, she thrust the washboard into the brook, and began to do the washing.

As was often the case during repetitive labor, her mind began to drift, thinking of better times. Before this, she had lived in a large, sprawling house. Far away from the scrutinous eye of civilization, the finest magical protections placed upon it, they had all been one family. Though not united by blood, they were bonded through a common purpose. For close to a decade, things had been perfect.

Everything changed on February third, slightly more than two years ago.

Like a swarm, Father Maciel's private militia, the Legion of Christ, descended from all sides, bypassing their defenses as though they weren't even there. For all she knew, perhaps they weren't.

They had all done their best, but all was for naught. Against the night sky, the pillars of flame rising to the heavens had been nearly blinding, their home having been nearly devoured by that point. As night turned to day, there had only been two of them left. Miraculously, they had been able to fight their way through the few remaining drones, and apparate to safety.

A loud screech tore her from her reminisces. Was that an owl?

Jumping up, she ran back towards the cabin, where a snowy white owl was tapping upon the window, a letter grasped tightly within its talons. Before she could make it back, the window was opened, admitting the white bird.

"Have they found us?" she demanded, bursting through the door.

"If they had found us, I highly doubt they'd send us a courtesy note before storming the property," he snidely answered, without looking up from the letter. It was written on yellowed parchment, the type favored by the wizarding world.

"Well?" she demanded, hands on her hips.

"Well what?"

"What the fuck, Crowley?" Sylvia snarled. "Who is it? We haven't had any mail since we arrived here!"

"It's Harry."

"Ohmygod," Sylvia said, clapping her hands to her mouth. Though Crowley had claimed the Sorting Hat would have been able to provide the code to the vault, she never thought it would happen.

"Does this mean we can finally leave here?" she asked, feeling hopeful for the first time in years.

"Indeed it does," Crowley replied, getting up. "After all, we've a great deal of catching up to do."

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Author Notes:

Thus ends Sitra Ahra, year one. It's such a relief to finally have finished Harry's first year at Hogwarts. I feel like I succeeded in changing the first year around enough so that it had more value than a simple canon rehash. What do you all think?

I think I may take some time away from this story to clear my head a little, perhaps play some of the new video games that have come

out recently. Most likely I won't begin to post more chapters until mid-March or so.

Any comments, suggestions or criticisms would be deeply appreciated. Even a quick "I liked it," or, "it sucked" will suffice. I'll make an effort to answer every review I get. Who knows, if the clamoring gets loud enough, I may even start early. We'll see.

Thanks to my co-conspirator, mira mirth, for her valuable assistance with plotting, characterization, continuity and grammar. Her efforts save me a ridiculous amount of time with the editing process, and are deeply appreciated. Without her, this story would have many more technical problems.

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Huge thanks are also in order to darklordmike, who was the main instrument in guiding this story to the point it has now reached. He seems to have dropped off the face of the earth the past month, but he'll always have my thanks for the countless hours he's put into polishing this story.

Thanks to my beta, the lovely Princess Serine. Her dedication and quick turnaround shaved a few days off the posting date.

Last but not least, my thanks goes out to DLP for their steady flow of comments. Their complete lack of hesitation to call me out when my writings sucked were invaluable, and helped to force the story back into shape.

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Sixteenth Movement: A Moment of Clarity

June 24, 1992

All had fallen silent throughout the halls of Hogwarts. Where as just a week ago throes of screaming, laughing children had occupied the castle, now all that was left were ghosts and the occasional vermin. Even the professors had headed home, ready to enjoy a well-deserved vacation. That is, save for one man.

For some, their work had no respite.

Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts, sat behind his desk, going over the proposed budget for the upcoming school year. Unsurprisingly, the Board had reached new heights of audacity with the upcoming year's budget. Spearheaded by Lucius Malfoy, the Board had drafted a proposition to charge muggleborn students a tuition for attending Hogwarts, claiming since muggles paid no taxes in the wizarding world, muggleborn students were draining the Ministry dry.

Shaking his head slightly at the reminder, his tired eyes drifted away from the bit of parchment. It was times like these that he considered stepping down from his position, exhausted from the constant fighting. In less turbulent times, he may have actually done it.

However, far too many people depended on him to make such a selfish decision. Who else would have the political clout and reputation to fight against the Board's thinly disguised prejudice? Wizarding society was at a crucial crossroad. How long would it be until Voldemort got back in touch with his former Death Eaters, and began to rebuild his infrastructure?

Even more importantly, what of the one prophesized to defeat the Dark Lord? Judging by his last meeting with Harry Potter, the young man was seriously considering leaving behind England to attend Beauxbatons, which would not do at all. Within Harry Potter, he saw bits of himself, a child so extraordinarily gifted that he was without peer. A child so powerful, with the potential to one day lead their world, needed positive influence, a guiding light to keep from straying from the correct path. If he had such a person in his life, so many years ago...

Well, it certainly didn't do to dwell on the past, when the future was about to walk through the door. Barely ten seconds later the grinding of the spiral staircase met his ears. It was quite the gambit he was about to pull, but it had to be done if he any chance of enticing Harry back to Hogwarts.

The Headmaster's Office door opened, admitting the regal form of Lucius Malfoy. White-blond hair shining against his dark, pristine robes, the former Death Eater entered swiftly.

"Good evening, Lord Malfoy," Dumbledore greeted, his voice betraying none of his dislike. "Please, have a seat."

"Thank you, Headmaster," Lucius replied coolly, inclining his head a fraction of an inch before seating himself. "I appreciate you finding the time to meet with such short notice."

"Fortunately, the close of the school year allows for more flexibility within my schedule. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

Lucius smiled humorlessly; well aware that his presence was a barely-tolerated circumstance, but Dumbledore's thriving in the wizarding world was no coincidence. He knew how to play the game as well as anyone.

"Sadly, pleasure has little in common with the reason for my presence," the Malfoy patriarch drawled. "Have you been privy to any of the vicious rumors that have plagued my son?"

It took effort for Dumbledore to hide his indignation. Rumors?

"I'm afraid not, as my position within the school often insulates me from the rumor mill. Would you care to enlighten me?"

"Several of my colleagues upon the Board of Governors have mentioned that my son may be facing criminal charges for a harmless prank that went awry," Lucius explained in a bored tone, as if the matter at hand was inconsequential. "While normally such vengeful words are of little consequence, I fear that these unfounded claims may cling to my family's name like a noxious stench if not addressed immediately."

"Indeed, it is a difficult matter, dealing with unsubstantiated claims," Dumbledore agreed, nodding his head slightly. "However, I confess that I've heard nothing of a 'prank gone awry'. Would you care to elaborate more on the subject?"

"I think not," Lucius coolly replied. "You know which incident I speak of, that left my son with grievous injuries and a two-week stay at St. Mungo's."

"Ah, now I see where our misunderstanding was," Dumbledore murmured. "You see, in no way could your son's actions of that day be labeled as a mere 'prank'. What happened that day was a coordinated, unprovoked attack," he corrected, his voice adopting a harder edge.

Lucius' expression remained constant.

"I believe that you are misrepresenting my son's actions. Certainly, his prank was in poor taste, Draco himself will even admit to that. However, it was not an 'attack', as you mistakenly claim."

"Oh, it most certainly was," Dumbledore countered. "According to a first-year student who witnessed the incident, your son was quoted as claiming this attack was in retaliation for his long-running feud with Harry Potter."

"Impossible," Lucius quickly retorted. "My son was given strict instructions to not antagonize Harry Potter, as he was believed to have been mentally unstable, perhaps even dangerous."

"In that case, it would appear that your son did not take your words to heart. Both Harry and Draco have been feuding with one another the entire year, including a few duels which left your son, frankly, embarrassed."

Lucius was silent for a moment, regarding the Headmaster with his cold grey eyes. Had the Malfoy patriarch no knowledge of his son's indiscretions throughout the year? It seemed unbelievable, but if it was indeed Lucius that sent the ring to Harry, he would have known that Voldemort at one time inhabited Harry's body. Perhaps he had anticipated his son actually heeding his warning.

"Nonetheless," Lucius continued, apparently having moved on from the previous topic, "I came to you because despite our disagreements, you are a reasonable man."

Malfoy reached into his robes, withdrawing a single sheaf of parchment.

"As we're both aware, if I were so inclined, I could have my lawyer disentangle my son from this unpleasantness, but I thought we could clear this problem up without involving a third party."

Dumbledore gave a dismissive glance towards the parchment.

"Do you really expect me to sign a statement absolving Draco of the atrocity he committed towards an innocent muggleborn witch?"

"If you wish to avoid a lengthy legal process which will only drag your name through the mud further, then by all means, don't sign it," Lucius replied calmly, examining his fingernails. "That being said, I will also drop my support for the muggleborn tuition bill if you agree to sign the agreement."

"Well, that is certainly an intriguing offer," Dumbledore agreed, stroking his beard slightly. "However, I took the liberty of conferring with a friend on the Wizengamot, and was astounded to find that even muggleborn children are provided rights. Upon hearing that a muggleborn witch, a mere child, was tortured in such a fashion, my friend within the Wizengamot made it a priority to spread the story among her colleagues. I understand there was a fair bit of indignation upon hearing the story."

Lucius paled slightly at the statement, which did Dumbledore's heart good. He usually didn't traffic in dirty politics, but against a former Death Eater he had little reservation.

"Are you insane?" he hissed. "How is my son going to get an impartial hearing?"

"Quite simply, he will not. He will have to face the consequences of his actions, which I assure you, will be severe."

"Surely you do not intend to expel him?"

"Rather conveniently, he was placed on medical leave, preventing me from doing so. However, on the first of September, if he sets foot upon the Hogwarts Express, he will officially be off of medical leave, and I assure you, he will be expelled."

Lucius' mask cracked slightly at Dumbledore's verdict, displaying the rage that simmered beneath his emotional barriers.

"You would destroy my son's education, his chance at an independent future, for a single mistake?" he questioned incredulously, his eyes narrowed.

"As you are well aware, I am more than amiable to giving second chances. Late last term, your son attacked Harry Potter in the middle of the Slytherin Common Room."

"Preposterous!" Lucius declared, "Draco is intelligent enough to know Potter is too powerful to challenge."

As opposed to verbal rebuttal, Dumbledore merely retrieved the shielding pendant from his robes, and placed it on the desk. Lucius immediately reached out and grasped it, his expression dark.

"I assume that your son thought this item, of questionable origin, would be enough to overcome Harry's skills. He was vastly mistaken, however, as Harry still defeated him handily."

Lucius gave no indication that he heard, busy studying the amulet. With a scowl, he placed it into his pocket.

"Harry took the amulet from Draco, and I attempted to negotiate peace between the two. As a gesture of goodwill, I forced Harry into handing back the amulet, assuming that Draco had stolen the item from you, and would merely return it to avoid losing control of it again. However, your son used it against the muggleborn witch and her friends. Do you know what punishment accompanies the use of Dark artifacts at Hogwarts?"

Lucius' fingers twitched, as if itching to draw his wand. Oddly, Dumbledore got the impression that the former Death Eater was angrier with his son than anyone else.

"This was not an isolated incident," Dumbledore continued. "At various times throughout the semester, Draco has been at the heart of attacks upon Harry, but each time I gave him leeway, hoping that he would change. Your son has had more than his fair share of chances here at Hogwarts."

"Do you still plan to press charges regarding the amulet?" Lucius asked through clenched teeth, well aware that possession of the artifact transcended Hogwarts punishment.

"Well, that all would depend on you," Dumbledore responded, leaning forward. "The muggleborn witch suffered a terrible ordeal at the hands of your son, and the last thing she needs is to see Draco again. If you transfer your son to Durmstrang, I will ensure that all charges are dropped against your son."

"Absolutely not!" Lucius snapped. "Generations of Malfoys have attended Hogwarts, and I will not have my son shipped across the continent; that would be an admission of guilt."

"Well, perhaps that would be the case if he alone were to transfer," Dumbledore said quietly, letting his words hang in the air.

"What are you implying?"

"Draco's name is the only one I brought up to the Wizengamot, but three of his friends also participated in the attack, and I fully intend to expel them as well. Perhaps the four of them could all transfer to Durmstrang? You could always claim that the educational standards of Hogwarts are sorely lacking."

"An unquestionably true statement," Lucius spat, rising to his feet. "How do I know you'll follow through on your end of the bargain?"

"As Headmaster, the safety of my students is my primary responsibility. Once I have the Durmstrang acceptance letters in my hand, I will have ensured the safety of the muggleborn witch in question. At that point, prosecuting Draco or any of the other three students does not further my goals."

Lucius' lips upturned in an unconscious snarl, but he had no ground to stand upon.

"This is not over, Dumbledore," he hissed, before rising to his feet quickly and storming out of the office, slamming his door on the way out.

"The Malfoys always did suffer from distemper," Phineas Nigellus commented from the confines of his portrait.

"Indeed they have," Dumbledore agreed with a chuckle. Despite Lucius' claims, his gambit would have appeared to have paid off.

Perhaps come next semester, Harry might return after all.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

July 2, 1992

Carefully, Harry slowly poured pomegranate juice onto the flask atop the brass scale, stopping when it reached an ounce. He then poured the red liquid into his cauldron, where a potion the color of a robin's egg simmered. Upon mixing with the light blue potion, dark purple blotches began to blight the smooth surface.

Gently slipping his spoon into the cauldron, he began to stir in a clockwise direction. After every third full revolution he paused for three seconds, allowing the volatile ingredients a chance to settle.

After ten stirring cycles, the purple blotches had properly displaced, leaving behind a uniform shade of lavender. Balancing the spoon against the side of the cauldron he stepped sideways, glancing at his open copy of "Magical Drafts and Potions". Pressing his finger to the text, he began to read aloud.

"At this final stage, your potion should be a light shade of lavender, completely without flaw."

His studious expression immediately fell apart, giving way to a small smile. It had taken him a few tries, but he had finally completed his first perfect Draught of Relaxation. Grabbing a spare flask from the cabinet, he ladled a small portion of the lavender potion into it for his guardian's scrutiny, but Harry was certain Nicolas wouldn't have much to criticize. With a chuckle, he mused that Nicolas would probably be slightly disappointed to have nothing to correct.

For once, anyway.

The potion completed, he lifted his cauldron off of the flame and dumped its contents into the grating to the right of his work station. Nicolas had refused to teach him vanishing spells, claiming he wasn't old enough, but he had compromised. There was a vanishing ward six inches below the grating, which made short work of all liquids. His guardian had warned him to be very careful not to drop anything important into it, the mere thought of which brought a grin to his face. The mesh on the grating was packed so tightly he doubted anything larger than a mouse could fit through.

As expected, the purple potion flowed easily through the grating, leaving little in the way of residue behind. Conjuring water, Harry rinsed the inside of the cauldron, washing it out. Hoisting it back onto the fire, he filled it with water, before dropping a small amount of cleanser into the cauldron.

One of the first practices Nicolas had drilled into his head was to sterilize one's cauldron before and after every brewing, as to eliminate the uncertainty factor in one's brewing. Harry privately thought that sterilizing it solely after brewing was enough, but went along with his guardian's policy. Nicolas Flamel was known at one of the finest Potion Masters in the world, and as such one did not throw out his advice lightly.

After the water had been boiling for roughly five minutes, the cleanser doing its work on the pewter interior, he extinguished the flames. Dumping out the boiling water into the grating, he cast a drying charm within the cauldron's interior. The cleaning done, he turned back to his book. What should he make next?

From behind him, the creak of the laboratory door opening stole his attention.

"Good afternoon, Harry," Perenelle greeted, closing the door behind her.

He returned her greeting as she moved over to his bench, pulling up a stool beside him.

"What are you making?"

"Well, I just finished the Draught of Relaxation, but now I'm looking for something else."

"Another one?" she asked, "have you not been in here for eight hours today already?"

Harry shrugged at her statement. It was probably more like nine, but close enough.

"I just felt like brewing today," he said simply.

She nodded at his explanation.

"How did the draught come out?"

"Um, pretty good, but I saved some for Nicolas to take a look at, in case I missed something."

"I am certain that it is fine," Perenelle said with a chuckle, which seemed slightly forced. "I mean, you have certainly received plenty of practice from all the time you have spent in here."

Harry sighed at her statement, well aware of where it was coming from. He wished his guardian has taken a more direct path with her questioning, but then again, she wasn't used to dealing with kids.

"Making potions relaxes me," he explained simply, hoping she'd leave the subject alone.

"How so?" she asked. "With all the steps and precise methods to follow, it seems like reading a book or listening to the wireless would be more relaxing."

Harry shook his head at her reasoning.

"When I'm brewing, the complexity of the task fills my mind, makes it so I...I don't have to think about anything."

Reaching down, she took his hand and squeezed it lightly.

"How bad has it been lately?" she kindly asked.

"It's getting better," he replied with a shrug.

He hadn't been able to fully appreciate it at Hogwarts, but upon returning to the Flamel residence, without the nearly constant support of his friends, thoughts of Percy plagued his days. The nights were worse, where countless time he had replayed Percy's final moments in nightmare form, like a record skipping.

"I still think about it, but keeping myself busy usually helps."

She nodded understandingly.

"You do whatever you need to help yourself, but please do not hesitate to ask myself, or Merlin forbid, my husband, for anything."

He let out a small chuckle at her statement. It was slightly forced, but he did appreciate his guardian's efforts.

"If I need anything, I'll come straight to you."

"Thank you," she said, favoring him with a fond smile. "Well, I shall leave you to it. Good luck with the next potion."

Harry gave her a small wave as she exited the laboratory, slightly relieved by their conversation. He thought he'd have to justify his immersion in potion-making to her, but she seemed to understand. Feeling eased, he turned back to his book. He knew he'd probably be fine, he just needed time.

Time healed everything, right?

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

"And that, Harry, is why there is absolutely no hope for your generation," Nicolas concluded, before taking a deep drink from his goblet.

Harry shook his head incredulously, turning to Perenelle, typically the voice of reason in these matters.

"I've known Nicolas for two years and I still can't figure out where he comes up with this stuff."

She sighed theatrically at his comment.

"I have known him for six hundred years, and am just as lost as you."

"Well, if my assertions are so incorrect, by all means, present a counter-argument," Nicolas said, throwing his hands in the air.

Harry groaned at the challenge.

"I don't even know where to begin."

"Ah ha!" Nicolas exclaimed, jabbing his index finger forward. "If you cannot start, you can never begin."

"You know what? You win," he conceded, sinking in his chair. "My generation has no hope."

"Giving up so easily, are you?" Nicolas mocked.

"Nicolas!" his wife chided, her eyes narrowed. "This is not an intellectual battleground and you have not bested a renowned thinker of our time! We are just trying to have breakfast and you insist-"

The heavy rustling of wings stopped her mid-sentence. Looking up, he saw a non-descript barn owl fly in. It landed gracefully on the table, offering a letter to Harry.

"I suppose it is for you," Nicolas observed dryly. Indeed it was, as Harry's name was scrawled upon the front of the yellowed envelope in a gentle, looping scrawl. Turning it over to open, he saw a flash of recognition in his guardian's eyes. It must have been someone Nicolas knew well to be able to identify the writing.

"Who is it from?" Perenelle asked, not as familiar with the writing.

"I don't know," Harry admitted, opening the letter.

Dear Harry

It is my hope that this summer has found you well, and provided the necessary time to heal from the traumatic events of last term. During

the summer season, there is no finer place of recreation than the Flamel Manor, so I am sure you shall be more than equal to the task.

As for the purpose of this correspondence, you might be interested to know that I have next to me the official, signed transfer papers of Draco Malfoy, Pansy Parkinson, Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle, all of whom are currently transferring to Durmstrang Academy. By the time the next term starts, the aforementioned students will have left Hogwarts for good.

Upon hearing of young Miss Granger's unfortunate plight, an admittedly surprising number of Wizengamot members were outraged at her treatment. Lucius Malfoy did attempt to keep his son enrolled at Hogwarts, but found that even his regular political allies were hesitant to bend the rules for Draco's sake, in light of his heinous actions. Much to Lucius' surprise, there was a contingent within the Wizengamot who wished to prosecute his son for his crimes. Far from the resolution Lucius expected.

Left with no other option, Lucius immediately spoke to the Headmaster of Durmstrang Academy, an old acquaintance of his, and transferred his son. The parents of Draco's accomplices swiftly followed suit.

I am well aware that this is not the expulsion you wished for, but as I have already assured Miss Granger, the students that attacked her will no longer be attending Hogwarts. I certainly hope that this eases some of your concerns regarding student safety within Hogwarts.

Sincerely

- Dumbledore

P.S. Please send my regards to both of the Flamels. That is, unless you're pressed for time, in which case just send my regards to Perenelle.

Finishing the letter, Harry was stunned for a moment. Considering all the political power that Lucius wielded, it seemed like an utter certainty that Draco would go free, and return to Hogwarts. Amazingly, he had been wrong.

"Um, can I be excused?" he asked, looking up at the Flamels.

"What is the matter?" Perenelle asked, clearly worried. "Who was it?"

"Oh, well, nothing's the matter," Harry said quickly, "I just need some time to think about some things."

Perenelle looked reluctant to let him leave without further interrogation, but gave him a single nod.

"Certainly, but if there is anything you need, please do not hesitate to ask."

"Yeah, I won't," he replied, getting up.

"When you are ready, we will be in the sitting room," Nicolas said. Harry gave him a nod, before leaving the kitchen behind. He just needed time to think.

Dumbledore had just given him a good reason to go back to Hogwarts. Now he just need to convince the Flamels.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Slowly, Harry made his way towards the sitting room. During the warm summer months, the Flamels often took advantage of the warm sun and cool ocean breeze drifting through the open bay windows.

Walking into the room, he observed that both of the Flamels were reading. Nicolas seemed engrossed in the latest issues of Transfiguration Weekly, while Perenelle was staring blankly at a thick tome Harry couldn't read the cover of. It almost seemed like the book was a prop, and Harry had time to feel a pang of regret. He hadn't wanted to leave them in the cold, but he had needed time to think.

Upon Harry's entrance, Perenelle favored him a slightly nervous smile and put down the book she was pretending to read.

"I'm sorry for making you wait," Harry said, returning her smile.

"Oh, do not worry about it, Harry," she replied. "We were just concerned about you."

"You have nothing to be sorry for," Nicolas stated, his voice free of its normal playfulness. "We both appreciate that you needed time."

He certainly did. Taking a deep breath, he withdrew Dumbledore's letter from his pocket, and held it out towards the Flamels. Surprisingly, Perenelle shook her head at his movements.

"We respect your privacy, Harry. The letter was addressed to you, not us. Keep it, just tell us whatever you feel comfortable sharing."

Slightly surprised at their reaction, he stuffed the letter back into his pocket.

"The letter was from Dumbledore, as you probably already know," Harry began. At mention of the name, Nicolas' face hardened slightly, and Perenelle's smiles lost some of its luster, but they said nothing. Was the row that his guardians and Dumbledore had during his recovery worse than he had imagined? How bad had it been?

"Draco and the other students who attacked Hermione are transferring to Durmstrang this summer."

"That is very good," Perenelle said. "I certainly cannot imagine her wanting to come back to Hogwarts if that horrible boy had still been there."

Harry shook his head at her conclusion.

"Even if he did, Hermione planned to come back."

"Really?" Nicolas asked, sounding intrigued.

"Yeah. Hermione...she's...really, really determined when she gets her mind onto something. She says that the wizarding world will never change if muggleborn don't try to change it themselves."

"Such tenacity is admirable," Nicolas commented, nodding approvingly.

"Well, even if she was coming back either way, I am glad that she will not have to deal with that rotten boy, even if it is a surprise."

"Surprise?" Harry questioned, raising an eyebrow, "he deserved to be kicked out."

"Oh, certainly," Perenelle agreed, "but Dumbledore, during his tenure at Hogwarts, has expelled very few students. Why, fifty years ago, a student was responsible for a young girl's death, and Dumbledore still convinced the Headmaster at the time to allow for the offending student to stay on as groundskeeper."

"Wait...you don't mean Hagrid, do you?" Harry asked, forgetting his original point.

"She does," Nicolas confirmed, "but I must say, something always seemed off about the case. I have not met Hagrid on many occasions, but I think it more likely that Dumbledore was absolutely convinced of his innocence, but his hands were tied."

Filing the information away for later use, Harry continued on.

"Anyway, I know that Dumbledore thought he had given enough chances to Draco, the only problem was getting it past his father."

You know, the guy who tried to kill me.

"What did Dumbledore do to assure the elder Malfoy would not interfere?" Nicolas asked.

"Well...the letter really didn't say," Harry admitted, "but Dumbledore did have the transfer papers, so it was definitely happening."

"It would seem so."

Harry was quiet for a moment, before throwing caution to the wind.

"I want to return to Hogwarts next term."

Perenelle frowned slightly at the statement, but didn't exactly look surprised. Nor did her husband.

"Harry, I thought we were all in agreement that Hogwarts could not assure your safety," she pointed out.

"Well, yeah – I know we agreed that...but I've been doing some thinking."

"Well, that would explain the aroma of burning wood we noticed earlier," Nicolas remarked dryly. "What conclusions did you draw?"

"Yeah, there are problems at Hogwarts," Harry admitted, "but there's more good than bad."

"Harry, you almost..." Perenelle trailed off, losing her composure slightly, reconsidering her words. "You were seriously hurt there twice during the year. That is more than a mere 'problem', Harry."

"You're right, but the two people behind the attacks, Voldemort and Draco, aren't going to be at Hogwarts anymore."

"Voldemort cannot be underestimated," Perenelle replied, shaking her head. "If he has reason to enter Hogwarts, he will find a way in."

"At least Hogwarts has wards," Harry pointed out, "would Beauxbatons be able to put up the same repelling wards?"

"Perhaps," Nicolas answered, "but your primary motivation is not safety related, is it?"

There was no accusation in his words, only an honest question of perspective, which relaxed Harry slightly. Nodding, he replied.

"For the short part of my life I can remember, I haven't had many friends. At the orphanage, I didn't talk to anyone, and none of the other children went out of their way to talk to me. I mean, when you invited the Delacour family over here, that Fleur girl even tried to put me under a spell! It's...I just don't get along with other kids. That is, until I went to Hogwarts."

Perenelle's face saddened at his words, but she remained silent, allowing for him to continue.

"It's like nothing I've ever experienced before. People who put themselves at risk for me, who can make me laugh when I'm in a

bad mood, who are always there to support me despite how much trouble I'm in? I wouldn't trade that for anything."

"Trouble does seem to have a way of finding you," Nicolas pointed out, "but I understand your viewpoint on the matter. Is it truly worth it to you? Considering that Hogwarts Board is still in place, and if the Prophet's writings as of late are any indication, the Ministry still holds a grudge against you. Harry, most of the wizarding world has seen the headlines hinting that you may have played a part in Percy Weasley's death, as disturbing as it sounds. Are you prepared to face a school full of children who may believe the lies of the Prophet?"

"If it was just me, I'd leave Hogwarts right now, but with my friends to support me, I can do it. I mean, with Voldemort loose, is any school safer than another? Besides, Britain is my home, I can't imagine going to school in France. I don't speak the language, and if all the kids are like Fleur, well..."

"I am sorry that you and Fleur got off on the wrong foot," Perenelle stated, "we thought the company might be appreciated."

"No, I appreciate the thought," Harry hurriedly assured, "but Fleur was just really difficult to get along with, really...unpleasant."

Nicolas chuckled at his statement.

"Come now, Harry, surely you are not trying to convince me that 'every' aspect of her was unpleasant?"

Perenelle rolled her eyes at her husband, but Harry let out a laugh.

"Okay, maybe not everything," he said with a grin, "but do you see my point?"

Instead of answering, Nicolas turned to his wife and regarded her silently, hand outstretched. She sighed in resignation, taking his hand within her own.

"Dumbledore seemed to have learned from his prior mistakes, so perhaps it would be safe for Harry to attend Hogwarts this year after all."

"I'm glad you understand," Harry admitted, relieved they listen to his points.

"However, there will be conditions," Perenelle said, her expression serious.

"Conditions?"

"Indeed, conditions," Nicolas confirmed. "If something bad does happen, we are not going to pull you out of Hogwarts, but we do expect to be informed of anything that goes horribly wrong. As your guardians, we have the right to know you are safe."

"Yeah, definitely," Harry replied, nodding enthusiastically. "I'm really sorry about last year, but I won't do it again."

"Excellent. Well, as long as you hold up your end of the bargain; I see no reason not to let you attend. Can you think of anything else, dearest?"

Perenelle sighed, giving a slight shake of her head.

"No, I can not. Just please stay out of trouble, Harry."

"I will," he automatically replied, but the seed of doubt had already been planted within his head.

When had he ever managed to stay out of trouble?

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

"Begin," Nicolas said firmly, flinging a stunner. Harry sidestepped the crimson spell and thrust his wand forward, sending a jet of water at the alchemist. Conjuring a physical shield, Nicolas blocked the torrent of liquid, following up with a body-bind. Harry rolled to the side to avoid it, transfiguring the water to steam as he did so.

"Good work!" Nicolas roared; sweat pouring down his face. With a wave of his wand, he vanished the steam. Pressing forward, Harry flung a disarm, but his guardian merely swatted it aside before waving his wand in a wide circle. From behind Nicolas, two wooden chairs came to life and began to scuttle forward.

"Reducto! Reducto!"

As Harry's two quick blasting curses obliterated the chairs in a rain of splinters, he hastily conjured a shield. The shield snapped into place just in time to deflect Nicolas' Confundus Charm, spitting it back at the alchemist at high speeds. Almost casually, he summoned another chair into the path of the yellow spell. Seeing an opening, Harry snapped off a stunner, but Nicolas deftly sidestepped the crimson spell.

With a wave of his wand, Harry transfigured the flooring beneath his guardian into ice. Nicolas, grinning wildly, brought his wand down, dissolving the ice below him. Swinging it up, he whipped his wand forward, banishing a heavy book. Harry jumped over the low-lying projectile, a spell on his lips.

Before he could finish the incantation, something heavy hit him in the back, knocking him forward, dislodging his wand. Harry stumbled after the holly wand, before Nicolas summoned it wordlessly into his outstretched hand. Aggravated, he looked upon at his guardian.

"I must be getting good if you have to use stuff I've never seen," Harry snapped bitterly.

"You certainly are improving," Nicolas replied, granting a rare compliment. "How did I defeat you?"

Rubbing his back, Harry turned around. Behind him, lying on the floor wide open, its spine bent, was the thick book Nicolas had banished at him.

"Did you summon it after you banished it?" Harry asked, forgetting his annoyance.

"Indeed I did. Summoning and banishing, when used effectively, can be used to keep your opponent constantly off-balance."

"Yeah, it looks really useful," Harry admitted, "but how did you summon it? I was in between you and the book, and didn't see any spell."

"There was no spell to see. Summoning is rather unique, as the magic is cast upon the wand, not the object. It creates an attractive force between the desired object and the wand. If done correctly, one can even summon an object from hundreds of feet away."

"So I would never have to go to the kitchen for a sandwich again?" Harry asked cheekily.

"If you do not mind your food mangled, then certainly," Nicolas agreeably replied, "but it takes quite a bit of time to become proficient at summoning."

"What's the incantation?"

"Accio, followed by the name of the object you wish to summon."

Harry turned, training his wand upon the thick tome behind him.

"Accio book!"

To Harry's disappointment, the book did not move an inch.

"I did just tell you it takes time," Nicolas mused.

"Yeah, I know," Harry replied with a shrug, "but I figured it was worth a shot. I mean, other spells have come really easily to me."

"Well, you are beginning to leave behind the amateur realm of magic, which is an extraordinary feat for someone your age. You have more than enough mental discipline to perfect summoning, you just need practice. Large amounts of it."

Grinning at the praise, he readied his wand again, eager to begin. If he could get good at the Summoning Charm, combined with his efforts in dueling transfiguration...well, would there be a single student at Hogwarts that could beat him?

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

"Who do you think was the first wizard to sit down and say 'you know what, I should mix strawberry and peanut butter together'?" Harry asked, staring down at the dwindling level of ice cream in his bowl.

"Come on, Harry," Tracey replied with a roll of her eyes, "it was obviously a witch who came up with it."

"Yeah, definitely," Millicent seconded through a mouthful of butterscotch and lemon sherbet, another of Fortescue's odder creations.

"Why's that?" Neville asked.

"Pregnant women come up with all sorts of insane cravings. Some of the stuff my mum told me about...well, you wouldn't want to know," Tracey finished with an exaggerated shudder.

"I don't know, if you think about, strawberry and peanut butter isn't very far fetched," Hermione commented, looking up from her vanilla toffee.

Tracey put her elbows on the table and linked her hands, supporting her head with them.

"Oh, so you've seen people dip strawberries in peanut butter too?" she asked mockingly, leaning forward, drawing a laugh from the other three children. Even Hermione was unable to keep a smile from creeping onto her face.

"Okay, okay, point taken, but think about it: people love peanut butter, people love strawberry, two sweets. Mixing two common sweets together isn't that strange."

"It's the principle!" Harry exclaimed dramatically. "They don't go together!"

"They do compared to some of the stuff I've seen. There have been much, much stranger flavors in the muggle world."

"Like what?" Neville asked, leaning forward.

"Yeah, what horrors does the muggle world hide?" Millicent added, also interested in Hermione's claim.

"Vanilla and lobster ice cream," she deadpanned.

Neville and Millicent immediately turned to one another, twin looks of revulsion and horror upon their faces. At their expressions, Harry and Tracey began snickering uncontrollably.

"Lobster?" Neville questioned, still not completely believing.

"Lobster."

"So, we're talking about the scary looking things with claws that live in the ocean, right?" Millicent asked, desperately trying to wrap her mind around the concept.

"Yeah, we are," Tracey replied, "unless you're talking about the other kind of lobster?"

"The kind that doesn't exist?" Harry helpfully added.

"Yeah, that one."

Millicent turned to Neville covertly.

"Neville," she whispered loudly, "I think they're serious."

"I do too," he replied, "but who would ever buy it?"

"Not too many people," Hermione admitted.

"Perhaps there's hope for the muggles after all," Millicent said wistfully, eliciting a laugh from the group.

"So, are we ready to go?" Harry asked, looking around, "or do we have to watch Tracey stare at her ice cream for another hour?"

"Well, I'm dreadfully sorry that I didn't inhale mine like you did."

"Apology accepted," he replied with a wry grin.

"Prat," she muttered with a small smile, pushing the bowl away from her and getting up. The rest of the group followed her lead. Crossing the street, making their way through the crowds of people, they arrived at Flourish and Blotts.

So far, compared to his previous trip to Diagon Alley, this one was shaping up a lot better. He wasn't nearly as tense, as the Ministry wasn't actively hunting him this year. Certainly, he received his share of glares from the crimson-robed Militia members that stalked the streets, but surrounded by friends, it was something that he could easily laugh off.

Dwarfed by the towering stacks of books that stretched up to the rafters, Harry pulled out his list of books he needed for the school year, or as he referred to it, 'The Complete Works of Gilderoy Lockhart'. He had never heard of the bloke, but Hermione had explained that he was one of the most accomplished wizards of the past decade. Seeing as how the decade was only two years old, Harry had not been greatly impressed.

Making his way towards the back of the store, he noticed that there was a display set up against the wall. A huge banner of Gilderoy Lockhart, his pearl-white teeth as big as books, smiled winningly down at the store's patrons. In front of the banner was a simple table and chair, while on the sides the bookstore's assistant was stacking high Lockhart's written exploits. Reporters and photographers fringed the display, in various states of preparation.

"I guess he has a lot to say," Harry commented, looking at the stacks of books.

"Oh yeah, he's done so much," Hermione said enthusiastically, staring up at the banner.

"Although," Harry added, "why do we have to read them? Are they textbooks? Seems like a lot of books to buy for a single class."

"Harry," she chided, "there's a lot of information in those books!"

"Right," Tracey said with a snort. "With all the Lockhart books we have to buy, I wouldn't be surprised if he got the Defense position and just wanted to boost his book sales."

Hermione looked aghast at Tracey's cynicism.

"He'd never do that! He's famous, Tracey, and probably has more than enough money. What's the point of selling a few more books?"

"Listen to yourself! Next you're going to tell me that it's a coincidence you wanted to come to Diagon Alley today. You knew he was doing a signing today, didn't you?"

Hermione sputtered incoherently for a short moment, causing Harry, Neville and Tracey to break into hearty laughter. Her face growing red, Hermione's eyes sought out the sole member of the group who wasn't laughing.

"It was all Millicent's idea!" she claimed, desperately trying to deflect attention.

"Traitor!" Millicent exclaimed, pointing at Hermione, blush rising in her cheeks.

"Are you two going to have a duel to see who gets to the autograph line first?" Harry asked innocently, basking in the embarrassment of his friends. At his question, Millicent and Hermione glanced at one another.

"Should we kill him?"

"Definitely," Millicent replied, turning on Harry, who quickly danced away from the two girls.

"Don't let me get in the way of your beloved," he mocked, putting Neville and Tracey into stitches.

At the commotion, one of the stationed reporters turned around, an older man with graying hair. His initial frown of distaste immediately faded, to be replaced by surprise, his eyes widening upon seeing Harry. The reporter immediately rushed forward, pulling a notepad from his robes.

"Mr. Potter," the reporter said, his voice shrewd, "what do you have to say about the allegations that you played a role in the death of Percy Weasley?"

"How dare you?" Tracey shrieked, but the reporter stoically ignored the muggleborn, his focus solely upon Harry.

"I had nothing to do with it," Harry snapped back testily, the subject still a sore spot. Before he could elaborate further, more reporters swarmed in, asking rapid-fire questions.

"Where were you during Percy Weasley's funeral?"

"How do you think your parents, Light wizards, would react to your forays into the Dark?"

"What do you have to say about the allegations that Headmaster Dumbledore provides you with preferential treatment?"

Eyes darting wildly at the closing wall of reporters, he saw a blond man peek his head out from the back room, a scowl on his face. He called the manager over to him and began to gesture wildly, almost angrily. Feeling hands grasp him, he began to be pulled backwards, away from the reporters. Looking back, he saw that his friends were trying to pull him away from the mob, but they continued to follow him.

Breaking through the crowd, the manager stood in front of the reporters, arms stretched above his head.

"This is a bookstore, and I will not have my customer harassed! Step back or you will be permanently banned from this establishment."

A few of the more daring reporters tried to challenge him on the matter, but were eventually turned back like the rest: muttering to themselves, casting dark looks over their shoulders. Shaking his head, the manager turned back towards Harry.

"Let me apologize for...that. I'm afraid I can only hold them back for so long, however, and think it would be best if you left the premises."

"...but what about our books?" Harry asked. "I need them for school."

"We have the second year booklist on hand. If you wait at the front of the store, I'll have the assistant bring them out to you."

"What about my friends? Just for knowing me the reporters might try to bother them too."

"Fine," the manager said with a sigh, "I'll have my assistant bring them out as well. Now please, if you would..." he finished, gesturing towards the door. Eager to be free from the bookstore, Harry gladly left.

"What was all that about?" Neville asked upon exiting the bookstore. "That Lockhart bloke looked like he was going to start throwing things."

"He wanted the reporters to be focused on him," Harry stated, shaking his head.

"I don't think -" Hermione started to say, before Tracey angrily cut her off.

"Stop day dreaming! Look at the booklist! Lockhart is going to teach at Hogwarts next year, and this was going to be his big announcement. Hermione, even you have to admit it's wrong to teach us from his own books!"

"Well, why not? Who better to teach us than someone who's already fought the Dark Arts most of their life?"

Tracey went to argue further, but Harry laid a hand on her shoulder.

"You can't argue with the love-stricken," he said in a low, mournful voice, drawing a snicker from Neville and Tracey.

"I hate you all," Hermione said, glaring about her.

"Even me?" Millicent asked.

"Of course. You're my competition."

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Running down the marble tiled corridor, Harry cut a right, rushing through the door of the Sitting Room. Nicolas' head snapped around at the dramatic entrance, while Perenelle leaped to her feet.

"Harry, what is the matter?" she asked, her voice concerned.

"They finally replied," Harry responded, holding up a white envelope.

There was no question of who 'they' were.

"That is wonderful," Perenelle replied, sending a favorable smile in his direction. "What did they say?"

"Not much," Harry admitted, "but they said they'd like to sit down and begin to discuss my past," he finished excitedly. He was finally going to find out about his childhood!

"How do they propose to set up the meeting?" Nicolas asked, his tone far more reserved than his wife's had been.

"Well, they said that a neutral meeting site would probably be best, since we don't know each other at all."

"A wise offer," Nicolas said with a nod. "I would have been very hesitant to allow strangers onto this island, so that is rather convenient. Do they have a date in mind?"

"They said whenever I was ready, to let them know the time and place," Harry said excitedly. "When can we do it?"

The Flamels looked at one another, engaged in silent conversation. Frustrated by their lack of reply, he sat down heavily in a chair, crossing his arms. What was the big deal?

"Harry, we are happy for you, and understand that you're excited," Perenelle began slowly, "but we are, with good reason, slightly leery of this entire situation. If what the Sorting Hat said was true, there are some very dangerous thoughts deep within your mind. We cannot help but wonder what type of people would expose a child to such a heavy burden."

Harry remained sullen in the chair. The Flamels had a very good point, but it certainly wasn't anything he wanted to admit.

"However," Nicolas continued, picking up his wife's thread, "we do acknowledge that you have a right to know more about your past. We would need to, with absolute certainty, be able to ensure your safety."

"How?"

"It would have to be a place of our choosing, one that we could easily secure. Also, I would want an additional person on our side to be there, as a foil should the situation deteriorate."

Harry found it highly unlikely that the people who apparently taught him so many things would want to kill him, but the Flamels weren't really asking a lot of him.

"Who?"

"Dumbledore," Perenelle answered quietly. Harry found himself surprised by their decision.

"I know, not the person you would expect us to pick, considering how the last term ended," Nicolas admitted, "but for all his faults, he is one of the most skilled wizards alive, and there is no one I would rather have stand by my side in a duel."

"Thank you," Harry said respectfully. He was humbled that the Flamels, who by all indications had a rough time with Dumbledore, would put the past to sleep for his sake.

"You are very welcome, Harry," Perenelle said. "You have always made us proud, and we truly do want to help you discover your past. Did they say what country they are from?"

"No, but just looking at what they wrote, I think they're British."

"I see," Nicolas replied, "in that case, perhaps Dumbledore can arrange for a room at the Leaky Cauldron. So, what day is good for you, Harry?"

Harry smiled wide at the question. He was finally going to find out who he truly was.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Author Notes:

Thus begins Sitra Ahra, year two. I'm not going to split up the various years into different stories, just continue with this one. Next

chapter should be out in about two weeks or so, where I'll begin to unravel the secrets of Harry's past.

Thanks to all for the feedback. I did start writing this chapter close to a month ago, but a ridiculously heavy work schedule (150 hours over 11 days) killed all progress on the chapter.

Any comments, suggestions or criticisms would be deeply appreciated. Even a quick "I liked it," or, "it sucked" will suffice. I'll make an effort to answer every review I get.

Thanks to my co-conspirator, mira mirth, for her valuable assistance with plotting, characterization, continuity and grammar. Her efforts save me a ridiculous amount of time with the editing process, and are deeply appreciated. Without her, this story would have many more technical problems.

Thanks to my beta, the lovely Princess Serine. Her dedication and quick turnaround shaved a few days off the posting date. It took her a mere 31 minutes to get back to me with her corrections. 31 minutes!

DLP Thanks:

blazzano, shinysavage, Oz, GrandHighPoobah, inert, afrojack

Seventeenth Movement: Solitary Refinement

August 24, 1992

To say the atmosphere within the rented room at the Leaky Cauldron was tense would have been an understatement. Though the two expected arrivals had given no physical description of themselves, Harry still tried to pick them out from among the scores of witches and wizards that passed below him as he sat on the windowsill.

Behind him, at a long table, placed in the center of the room, the Flamels were speaking in reserved tones. Harry had tried to follow the course of their conversation, but found himself unable to, his eyes and focus drawn back to the cobblestoned street below.

The room was one of the largest that the Leaky Cauldron offered for rent. A magnificent view of the Alley was only the start of its luxury. The room also offered a fully furnished bedroom, and an adjacent room complete with a full-sized dining area.

"Harry, please, have a seat," Dumbledore offered, pulling out the chair next to him. "Putting your concentration elsewhere will help to pass the time more swiftly."

"No thanks," he politely declined, without taking his eyes from the street. It was almost three o' clock, they had to be here soon.

Without warning, three slow, heavy blows rained down upon the door, freezing Harry in place. Three knocks, just as outlined within their return letter.

Perenelle immediately made her way to the door. Taking a deep breath she opened it, revealing two figures in hooded cloaks, of similar height.

"Please, come in," she welcomed, stepping out of the doorway.

"Thank you," a low, deep male voice rumbled. The visitor closed the door behind him and regarded Perenelle.

"Would it be a safe assumption that this room is completely secure from any unwanted intrusions?" he asked, his face still hidden.

"Indeed it would," Dumbledore said, rising to his feet.

"Excellent," the second visitor answered in a distinctively female voice, pulling back the hood of her cloak. Unburdened by the hood, dark red hair spilled out. Her young, pale face was round, giving one the impression of a porcelain doll. She stretched out her hand to Perenelle, who shook it hesitantly.

"Pleased to meet you, Perenelle. My name is Sylvia, and this is my companion, Crowley."

The second figure pulled back his hood at the introduction, revealing a grim, hard face with sharp features. The only hair upon his head was a close-cropped dark goatee. A ragged, white scar ran from the corner of his mouth all the way down his neck.

"A pleasure to meet you," Crowley said, unsmiling, shaking hands with Perenelle quickly, before moving on to Nicolas.

"Just 'Crowley'?" Nicolas asked incredulously.

"It will have to suffice, in light of having such an unexpected, influential figure in our midst," Crowley responded, staring at Dumbledore.

"He means no disrespect, of course," Sylvia clarified, sending a glare at Crowley. "We are just rather cautious when it comes to our identities, as were our whereabouts to fall into the wrong hands, things would become very unpleasant for all of us."

"Well, I have no intention of contacting the Prophet with the details of today's meeting," Dumbledore said, stepping forward. Crowley shook his hand briefly, before taking it back.

"Have we met before?" Dumbledore asked, his voice curious.

"We have not," he replied, "but I have certainly heard of both you and your exploits."

"Indeed?" Dumbledore prodded, stroking his beard, but Crowley chose not to reply, instead moving over to Harry. Looking up at the man, Harry felt nothing but a deep frustration. Upon seeing the

people from his past, he had expected some gigantic epiphany, as if the pieces would just slide into place.

"It's good to see that you are alright," Crowley commented, his gaze level.

"I'm sorry, but I still don't know who you are," Harry said, frustrated by his lack of recognition.

"That is to be expected. As I said earlier, I am Crowley," he replied, stretching out his hand, which Harry met with his own.

"And I'm Harry Potter."

"Indeed you are," he replied, stepping aside. Sylvia stepped into his wake, and leaned down, hugging him tightly.

"It's so good to see you again, Harry," the woman said before letting him go, almost regretfully. Behind her, he noticed that the Flamels had begun to reach for their wands, but had relented upon Harry being let go. "It would appear that Perenelle and Nicolas have done a fine job taking care of you."

"He makes it easy on us," Perenelle said, motioning for the two visitors to sit themselves at the table, which they did. Perenelle offered the duo refreshments, which they both politely declined.

"Well, thank you for taking good care of Harry," Sylvia said, her deep blue eyes studying Harry.

"We are not merely taking care of him," Nicolas clarified, "but are his legal guardians."

There was a slight menace in his voice, a possessiveness which seemed almost out of place coming from the normally laid-back alchemist.

"Let me assure you, we are not here to claim Harry back for ourselves. We were mere caretakers, nothing more."

"What kind of caretakers teach a ten year old boy to wipe his mind clean?"

Perenelle gave her husband a sharp look, before turning back to Sylvia.

"Forgive my husband for his blunt approach," she began, but Sylvia shook her head vigorously, sending her wild hair flying.

"His suspicion is not only understandable, but in this case, warranted. We fully admit that there are unquestionably a lot of strange aspects to this entire affair, but we will answer as many questions as we can."

"First off, however," Crowley broke in, "you did mention having a penseive in your possession, correct?"

"I suppose I did," Nicolas replied, rising from his seat. He went to the heavy oak cabinet in the room and withdrew the pensieve from the top shelf, placing it in the middle of the table. Staring at the shallow stone basin, odd symbols and runes carved upon its edge, Harry wondered what the two strangers would show first.

"If you would, Sylvia," Crowley implored, slightly impatiently. Sighing, the woman closed her eyes, as if deep in concentration. After a few moments, she gave a sharp nod, eyes still shut tightly. Crowley immediately pressed his wand to Sylvia's temple and then pulled back. A silvery, transparent wisp clung to the end of his wand, which he deposited within the stone basin, where it shone and glimmered like liquid moonlight.

"As you may have gathered," Sylvia spoke, her face slightly mournful, "sadly, I am a squib. Yet, somehow, I still received what many wizards refer to as 'the gift'."

"You are a seer?" Perenelle asked, the slightest bit of skepticism ghosting her question.

"Of sorts," Sylvia replied cryptically. "My visions are not limited to the future. Please, the memory will begin to paint the picture for you."

"Which one of you would like to stay behind?" Crowley asked to the group.

"I will," Nicolas immediately volunteered, eyeing the man distrustfully.

"Don't you want to see?" Harry asked, slightly surprised by his guardian's swift response.

"I do," Nicolas admitted, "but when within a pensieve, one is left defenseless. We just met these people, so we need to be prudent. Besides, I am certain you shall illuminate me at some point."

"Oh, okay," Harry replied, staring into the silvery, swirling depth apprehensively. What was so important that he needed to see it first?

"Do you understand how a pensieve works?" Sylvia asked, her voice kind, to which Harry responded in the positive. Nicolas had explained all about them last night.

"Good, so you understand that anything you see in there, it can't hurt you, right?"

Harry nodded, trying to hide his growing unease.

"Why do you ask?" Perenelle wondered, clearly concerned about what lay in store.

"Some of the memories we're about to view will be very, very...disturbing to Harry, but unfortunately, there are things that need to be established first before any explanations can take place."

An expression of worry upon her face, Perenelle turned to Harry.

"Are you certain you are prepared for this?"

No, he most certainly was not, but his need to know about his past outweighed everything else. Wondering if he was doing the right thing, he nodded sharply.

"Very good," Sylvia said, motioning towards the stone basin. "After you, Harry."

Taking a deep breath, he plunged his head into the silvery depths.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Delicately, Harry's feet touched down upon a soft, plush surface. Examining his surroundings revealed he was in a relatively small room carpeted in a thick purple rug. Pale yellow light from the circular ceiling fixtures provided little in the way of illumination, conjuring forth images of an aristocratic smoking room. Expensive looking mahogany furniture with green cushioning lined was spaced around the room's center, while tall display cases with glass fronts lined the walls.

He had never seen the room before. Where was he?

Before he could glance into the murky depths of the glass, Sylvia suddenly appeared in the middle of the room.

"Hopefully your first trip into a pensieve wasn't too terrifying," she stated.

"It wasn't that bad," Harry replied. Sure, the brief moment of free-fall and blindness had been terrifying, but it was already a fading memory.

Perenelle came immediately afterwards, swiftly followed by Dumbledore and Crowley. Upon the last arrival, Crowley strode confidently to the center of the room.

"Before the cycle begins, I thought it necessary to explain a few things. When I first began to string Sylvia's memories together, it quickly became obvious that a blank spot was necessary, where she could explain in further detail what's to come."

His piece given, he withdrew from the center, leaving a void which Sylvia quickly filled.

"Okay, as I said before, my abilities transcend quick glances into the future. Rather, what I can do is see the spiraling path that the future may take. I refer to this as the future's ghost."

"Um, what?" Harry asked, completely confused. While Perenelle seemed to share his bewilderment, Dumbledore looked deeply concerned, his eyebrows nearly contracted together. Did he understand all of this already?

Taking a deep breath, Sylvia continued.

"Time is not as absolute as we think. On higher places of existence, all sense of time and space becomes sharpened, folded together, where a difference of fifty years is no different than walking across the street. My ability grants me the power to see on a higher place, to see the ripples of all of our actions, and to see their consequences. The universe is set in stone, so if one can transcend time, the past and the present are exposed as one and the same."

Lowering her voice, she moved over to Harry, and knelt before him.

"Harry, if the universe was allowed to take its normal course, we would never have taken you from your ancestral home. Against all odds, against all reason, we shattered the stone that holds the universe in place. This...what we're about to show you, Harry, is what would have happened had we never come that night."

At Sylvia's final, bewildering words, the room faded from sight, to be replaced with the sight of what appeared to be a house under siege. Beneath brilliant stars, the house had been decimated, the entire second floor nearly destroyed, shrapnel spread across the yard like confetti. Where were they?

"Quickly!" Sylvia urged, moving towards the front of the house. Harry followed her lead, wondering what was going on. Looking back, he noticed a haunted expression upon Dumbledore's face. Did he recognize this place?

Taking a left around the corner of the house, it became clear the front was in no better shape. The entire entryway had been blown outwards, exposing a wide staircase and a flooded hallway. Without hesitation, Sylvia made her way through the entrance, taking an immediate right. The room beyond was in even worse condition. The entire far wall had been blown away, the remains of what might have been a fireplace scattered across the side yard. The interior wall had been all but obliterated by what looked like a strong blasting curse.

Sylvia stopped in the center, as if waiting for everyone to catch up. Granted a spare moment, Harry began to look around the room, noting that before it became a war zone, it may have been a living room. A few overturned chairs scattered the room, while pictures that had been shaken free from their mountings lay at the base of the walls.

"Where are we?" Harry asked, unable to figure out why this destroyed house was so important.

"This was your parents' home," Dumbledore said quietly, his eyes sorrowful.

Looking around, emotion began to well up within Harry. This was where it had all begun.

"Are...are my parents still here?"

"They are," Sylvia replied softly, with a distinct sympathetic note, "but we are not here to see them."

"What!" Harry exclaimed, incensed. He had never seen his parents before. Who the fuck did she think she was?

Before he could continue, Perenelle put a hand upon his shoulder. Looking up, he saw her eyes moist, as if she were holding back tears.

"I know you want to see them, but this is not how you want to remember your parents."

Reaching down, she plucked a frame from the floor and pressed it into his hands. His rage already subsiding, he glanced downwards at it, before his head darted up quickly.

"Is this...them?"

At her confirmation, he looked back down at the photo. It was a simple thing, but it proved beyond any shadow of a doubt that his first year had been joyous. The picture showed his parents standing together, proudly displaying their son.

Showing him.

His mother's radiant smile, framed by her auburn locks was carefree, showing no trace of the burdens of war. He was struck by the vivid green in her eyes, an exact copy of what he saw whenever he looked in the mirror. His father's arm was curled around her hip, gently pulling her towards him, a wide grin upon his face. His black

hair, so similar to his own, was mussed slightly at the back. Their adoration for the bundle within his mother's arms was so strong it practically radiated from the frame.

Reaching out with his other hand, he lightly brushed his fingertips over their faces, committing them to memory. Perenelle was right; this is how he should remember his parents, loving and carefree.

"Your parents," Crowley began to explain, drawing Harry's attention. "fearful of Voldemort, hid themselves beneath the Fidelius Charm. Sadly, they were betrayed by their Secret Keeper, allowing Voldemort to find them. He was able to defeat both of your parents, but when trying to kill you, his killing curse deflected off of you, disintegrating his own body. The magical backlash from the explosion, combined with the earlier structural damage, broke the Fidelius anchor, bringing the wards down. As soon as it did, myself and three of my companions arrived here, taking you away. If we had not come..."

At the very moment he trailed off, Harry heard splashing. Spinning around, he saw a tall man with black hair splashing through the standing water in the hallway, his wand held in front of him.

"James!" the man shouted, terror in his voice. He took an immediate left into the room across from the one Harry occupied. Stepping through the doorway, the man stopped in his tracks, letting out a long, anguished cry. With a sudden motion he spun around, flinging a dark yellow spell, blasting apart what little remained of the living room interior wall. Harry instinctively ducked, but the wooden shrapnel passed right through them.

Looking back, he saw the man drop to his knees, tears welling in his eyes.

"I'm so sorry James," he whispered, "I never should have switched; I should have known the secret was only safe with me. It's all my fault."

Wiping an arm across his eyes, the man rose to his feet. He flicked his wand downwards, conjuring a long white cloth, and stepped back into the other room.

Turning, Harry went to ask Crowley who that was, but noticed that Dumbledore looked visibly shaken, while Perenelle had clapped a hand over her mouth, her eyes wide.

"Oh Albus, were we wrong all along?"

"We may have been," Dumbledore replied sorrowfully, shaking his head slightly.

"Wait, what's going on? Who's that?"

"That man," Dumbledore said heavily, "is your godfather, who was entrusted as the Secret Keeper for Potter home, here in Godric's Hollow. Everyone, myself included, believed he betrayed your parents to Voldemort."

The man that had just fell to his knees in anguish, this Sirius Black, was responsible for this parents' death? Then why did he seem to truly care about James?

"This...this doesn't make sense."

"It appears as though, unbeknownst to anyone else, Sirius switched places with someone else to protect the secret of this location."

"Who else could it be?"

Before Dumbledore could answer, Sirius exited the dining room at a slow shamle. All traces of his former hurry were gone, leaving behind a defeated, downtrodden man. Like a prisoner approaching the gallows, he began to slowly ascend the stairs. Halfway up the stairs, the cries of a child met Harry's ears.

"Harry!" Sirius yelled, vaulting up the stairs, taking them three at a time. Harry went to follow his godfather, but Sylvia's voice stilled him.

"Give it a few moments, Harry."

Reluctantly, Harry did as ordered. From the second floor, he heard another anguished cry from Sirius. Moving to the forefront, Sylvia motioned them forward. Moving upstairs, he saw that the entire left side of the second floor had been obliterated. Upon reaching the top of the stairs, Sirius walked out of the only intact bedroom, a young

child cradled in one of his arms. Behind him, he levitated a child's cradle.

Harry's eyes widened as he beheld his younger self. The child, shiny tear tracks upon his cheeks, had stopped crying, and was snuggling into the warmth of Sirius' body. The familiar lightning-bolt upon his forehead was bright red, as if inflamed.

"It's going to be alright," Sirius assured, heading back downstairs. At the bottom, he set down the cradle, placing the child into it. Waving his wand in complicated motions, a pale white light flashed over the crib, before gradually subsiding.

"That will keep you warm," Sirius said. "Sleep, I have to go check on a friend. I'll be back in a few minutes."

The words spoken, Sirius turned and fled back into the night.

"Where did he go?" Harry asked incredulously.

"We don't know," Sylvia admitted, "but we assume he went to grab his motorcycle, since apparation with very young children is...inadvisable."

As her words faded, so did the world. After a moment it came back into sharp focus, once again displaying the debris strewn front yard of the Potter home.

"Give Harry to me, Hagrid, I'm his godfather, I'll look after him," a pale, slightly shaking Sirius implored.

The giant form of Hagrid, ruddy cheeks wet with his enormous tears, shook his head in response.

"Nah, I can't, Dumbledore said Harry was ter go righ' ter his aunt an' uncle's."

"That's ridiculous! We don't even know if Voldemort's gone! Hagrid, what are a few muggles going to do if Voldemort tries again! Merlin, there's still tons of Death Eaters out there!"

"I'm jus' followin' Dumbledore's orders."

Sirius' eyes narrowed at Hagrid's words, but he decided not to argue, instead blowing out a frustrated breath.

"Fine, in that case, take my motorcycle, you'll get him there faster."

Hagrid eyed the large vehicle appreciatively.

"Are ye sure?"

"I am, I'm not going to need it anymore," Sirius cryptically replied.

At Sirius' words, the ruins of his parents' home faded from sight. When the world reappeared, it was still night, but everything else couldn't have been more different. It was in a clearly muggle neighborhood, with row after row of houses with the exact same design, complete with immaculately maintained lawns.

At the foot of a driveway, Harry saw Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall standing together. The normally stoic, stern transfiguration professor was dabbing at her eyes with a lace handkerchief, a look of sadness upon her face. Dumbledore, giving a sniff, pulled out a large golden watch from his pocket.

"What's going on here?" Harry asked, turning to Crowley, who just shook his head.

"Pay attention, you're about to find out."

"Hagrid's late," the memory of Dumbledore commented, glancing at the transfiguration professor. "I suppose it was he who told you I'd be here, by the way?"

"Yes. And I don't suppose you're going to tell me why you're here, of all places?"

"I've come to bring Harry to his aunt and uncle. They're the only family he has left now."

"You don't mean – you can't mean the people who live here?" cried Professor McGonagall in an uncharacteristic show of emotion, jumping to her feet and pointing at the house before them. "Dumbledore – you can't. I've been watching them all day. You couldn't find two people who are less like us. And they've got this

son – I saw him kicking his mother all the way up the street, screaming for sweets. Harry Potter come and live here!"

"It's the best place for him," Dumbledore said firmly. "His aunt and uncle will explain everything to him when he's older. I've written them a letter."

At the words, Harry gave an incredulous look at the Dumbledore he knew. He had a godfather, and this guy still wanted to stick him with some unpleasant muggles, denying him his magical heritage? Shaking his head, he tuned back into McGonagall.

"These people will never understand him! He'll be famous – a legend – I wouldn't be surprised if today was known as Harry Potter day in the future – there will be books written about Harry – every child in our world will know his name.!"

"Exactly" said Dumbledore, looking very seriously over the top of his half-moon glasses. "It would be enough to turn any boy's head. Famous before he can walk and talk! Famous for something he won't even remember! Can't you see how much better off he'll be, growing up away from all that until he's ready to take it?"

Looking around, he saw that Perenelle was also glaring at Dumbledore.

"Albus, is this what you really had planned to do with Harry?"

"Yes, it is," Dumbledore admitted. "Though Voldemort had fallen, his followers were still many. Due to the nature of Lily's sacrifice, it would have afforded the opportunity to place him beneath the protection of powerful blood wards, which would have only been sealed at the residence of a blood-relative's home. The Dursleys were the sole family he had left."

"If it was so important, why did you not speak to them directly?" she asked sharply. "Surely such an important matter would warrant at least a courtesy greeting?"

Harry couldn't agree more, and was glad his guardian had spoken up. Just dumping him off on the doorstep, with a letter? What the fuck was that?

Before Dumbledore could answer, a bright light shone above them, followed by a loud roaring noise. Looking up, Harry saw that the source of the noise was Sirius' flying motorcycle, atop of which was Hagrid. In his arms he held a large bundle of blankets, which no doubt held his younger self.

"It starts to get really bad from here, doesn't it?" Harry asked gingerly, staring at the two mysterious benefactors.

"I'm sorry, it does," Sylvia replied, genuine remorse in her voice. "More so than you could ever imagine."

The dark began to retreat, to be replaced by the interior of a muggle home. Bright sunlight filtered through the windows, illuminating a house full of colorful balloons and streamers. Children, none older than four, ran around the house, screaming with the pure, unblemished joy.

The center of attention was a large, piggish looking blonde boy with a blue birthday hat strapped to his head. Above him, stretching from one end of the room to the other was a large banner which proclaimed 'Happy Birthday Dudley!'. The birthday boy was flanked by two beaming adults, most likely his parents. Judging by their dissimilar statures, the boy hadn't inherited much from his mother.

"Make a wish, Duddikins!" his mother implored, a tall, bony woman with a rather horse-like face. At her urging, Dudley drew in a massive breath, and blew out all the candles on the massive cake before him. As the last flame extinguished, the crowd of watching parents let out loud applause.

"That's quite enough of this," Sylvia said contemptuously, leading them away from the sight. She led them out of the large room, into a hallway. All the while, Harry couldn't help but wonder if these were the people Dumbledore had left him with. And if they were, then where was he?

She stopped before a small doorway that was nestled beneath the stairs, which probably served as a small storage space.

"There's not much room in there, so we'll wait out here," Sylvia said, motioning to Crowley. "Harry, I must warn you, this is going to be unpleasant, but you need to know."

"Oh, okay," Harry replied slightly shakily, not knowing what to expect. What was so bad about a small closet?

Taking his hand, Perenelle gave him an encouraging smile. He nodded at her once, feeling slightly emboldened, and allowed her to lead him through the wall. Though the light on the other side was dim, he was still afforded a clear view of the sight within.

The space within was just as small as he anticipated, yet somehow a mattress had been squashed into it. Upon it a few ragged blankets were piled. Behind the bed a few scant, broken toys were piled, as if they had been scavenged from the trash.

All of these were minor in Harry's mind, however, compared to the tiny figure pressed up against the door, his eye pressed up against a crack. Its legs and arms were almost impossibly thin, clad in shoddy, loose-fitting secondhand clothes which only served to accentuate its emaciation.

With dawning horror, Harry beheld his four year old self watching the proceedings with a hungry look of deep longing. More disturbing, there was no trace of resentment upon the boy's face. As if he had already accepted this was how things were supposed to be.

"Oh, Harry," Perenelle said, sorrow in her voice. As she squeezed his hand in support, the cupboard faded to black.

When color returned, the Harry they beheld had aged a year or two. In his hand he held a broken, blue crayon. Carefully, he began to draw on the wall, putting the finished touches on a Christmas tree. Letting out a quick smile, young Harry put the crayon down and picked up a red one, beginning to draw a box beneath the tree.

Without warning, loud hammer blows on the door caused both versions of Harry to jump.

"Hurry up!" an unpleasant voice demanded, "we haven't got all day!"

Scrambling, younger Harry scooped the crayons and placed them beneath his bed, before jumping to his feet and pushing the door

open. Towering above him, the large, round form of Dudley's father glared downwards.

"I called for you three minutes ago," the corpulent man said, his eyes narrowed with clear dislike.

"I'm sorry, Uncle Vernon," younger Harry replied mechanically, "it won't happen again."

"See that it doesn't," Vernon snarled, before turning heel and walking down the hall. As younger Harry followed, so did the elder.

Within the living room, a Christmas tree with almost countless present strewn below it sat. Younger Harry was ordered to sit off to the side, while the Dursleys exclaimed over every gift that their son opened. Every so often, Dudley would send his cousin a malicious smirk, every one seeming to deflate younger Harry further.

"Harry, are you sure you want to see this?" Perenelle asked, concern deep in her voice. Harry nodded distractively, focused on his younger self. With each passing second, he felt his rage towards Dumbledore increasing. McGonagall had warned him against these people! Hadn't he bothered to show up, to see how Harry was doing?

At long last, the opening of the gifts ended, Dudley thanked his father for such a wonderful Christmas, eyeing Harry as he did so.

"Only the finest for my boy," Vernon replied jovially. "Now, who wants some eggnog?"

"Nothing for me?" younger Harry asked timidly, before clapping his hands over his mouth. Both of the Dursley parents froze at his comment. Vernon broke his paralysis first, rounding upon Harry.

"You ungrateful wretch!" Vernon snarled, "after all we've already done for you?"

"You should be thankful we took you in at all," his Aunt sniffed. "If it weren't for us, you'd be on the streets, or in some orphanage, working from sunrise to sundown."

Dejected, Harry hung his head down, mumbling an apology, before the light pouring through the windows faded to night, where younger Harry was watching his uncle read a newspaper.

"Um, Uncle Vernon?" younger Harry asked, his hands fidgeting.

"What do you want?" Vernon replied without looking up from his newspaper.

"Uh...what happened to my parents?"

Vernon froze for a moment, before folding up his newspaper. He regarded Harry distastefully for a moment, letting out a snort.

"Your parents got themselves killed in a car crash, boy. No more questions!"

Before Harry could properly recover from the shock of his uncle's callous answer the room abruptly faded from sight, transitioning to a small bedroom. Broken toys lined a nearby shelf, while dying rays of sunlight splashed against the wall. On a nearby bed Harry saw a version of himself that was similarly aged. There was something odd about the light, though...

"Oh, Harry," Perenelle said, shaking her head. Following her gaze, he saw the source of her exclamation.

In the corner of the room, Hedwig sat on a perch within her cage, her head tucked beneath her wing, completely asleep. Next to her was a window.

A window with thick iron bars set into it.

"What the fuck is this?" Harry whispered to himself. Hearing a rattling, he spun around. A small tray had been thrust through the bottom of the door, bearing a small bowl of cheap, thin soup that appeared to be cold. Was this Harry a prisoner here? In his own home?

He was left with little time to ponder the matter as the poorly lit bedroom transitioned to another scene. Faster and faster then began to pass by, each scene burned into his consciousness.

Petunia taking a swing at Harry with a frying pan, which he barely avoided by ducking down, the cast iron missing his head by inches.

Harry being chased by a rabid-looking bulldog, and scrambling up a tree, barely avoiding getting bitten. Looking down, he saw Vernon and Dudley bellowing with laughter as he climbed higher.

Faster and faster the memories passed by, offering only the barest glance into the atrocities committed by his 'family'.

Without warning, everything stopped, fading to black.

"We could not leave you to this fate, Harry. You mean too much to this world," Sylvia's voice rang out, the last thing he heard before the world faded away for good.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

The memory forcefully ejected him, sending him reeling back away from the pensieve. His thoughts were a complete whirlwind, but one emotion screamed louder than any of the others.

"Harry, what happened?" Nicolas asked, clearly worried, but Harry barely heard the words, instead turning to Dumbledore.

"How could you leave me with those bastards!"

"Harry, I assure you I had no idea of what they were capable of."

"Of course not!" Perenelle exclaimed. "You never bothered to investigate them, even after McGonagall told you what they were!"

"I had very few options," Dumbledore said calmly, apparently undisturbed by Perenelle's outburst.

"Tu te fous de ma gueule?" Perenelle exclaimed, before regaining her English. "You had to have known there would have been many families willing to take Harry in!"

"As I explained before, Harry's safety was my primary concern, and the blood wards were the strongest defense available to me."

"What's going on here?" Nicolas asked, eyeing Dumbledore suspiciously. Perenelle, ignoring her husband, continued on.

"At what price, Albus?"

Dumbledore sighed heavily at her exclamation, closing his eyes for a moment.

"I had thought the Dursleys safer," Dumbledore admitted, "but beyond that, within a day of your arrival at the Dursleys, Sirius Black had been convicted of murder, and sentenced to a lifetime of imprisonment at Azkaban."

"What?" Harry exclaimed.

"Everyone believed that Sirius had betrayed your parents to Voldemort," Dumbledore explained. "A great deal of eyewitnesses saw Sirius murder thirteen people with a single curse in a muggle street, including one of his childhood friends, Peter Pettigrew, who was equally close to your parents. I personally testified to the Wizengamot that Sirius had been the Secret Keeper."

"But we know he wasn't the Secret Keeper! So not only did you send me to live with people that hated me, you sent the one person who would have taken care of me to prison!"

"Please understand, Harry," Sylvia pleaded, "that the man who stands before you never did any of those things to you. That was another reality. Where we are now is someplace entirely different, another world."

Harry, still resentful of Dumbledore, gave a grudging nod to placate her.

"Why me, though? Why did you rescue me?"

"From this point on, Harry," Crowley replied, "there are things that we simply cannot tell you. Your past is something great, magnificent, but there are also terrible things within it. If your guardians consent to it, we will indeed reveal your past to you, but it is something that must be done slowly, piece by piece, as to not overwhelm your mind. If we were to reveal it all at once, your mind would simply snap from

the strain. That being said, we will answer whatever we are allowed, to the best of our ability."

He paused for a moment, as if choosing his words carefully.

"As for why we chose you...you are special, Harry, more so than you could ever imagine. There are higher forces at play here, which have taken a keen interest in you. We were led to you, because you possess something which is very rare, valuable beyond all comprehension."

Oddly, Dumbledore's eyes widened at Crowley's statement, but he remained silent.

"Okay," Harry replied, "who are you people then?"

"When we took you," Sylvia replied, "we were a group of people with common goals and beliefs, which we worked towards every day. All of us lived within the house you saw in your memories, secluded from the rest of the world. For eight wonderful years, we stayed there, raising you the best we could."

She smiled fondly at the end of her statement, apparently thinking of better times.

"However," she continued, her expression darkening, "in early 1990, our home was attacked. For a short while, we held our own, but unwilling to take any chances, we transported you out of the house, halfway across the country. We had to be certain you got as far away from those monsters as possible."

"Monsters?"

"Without thought, without conscience," Crowley remarked, his voice contemptuous. "A fringe branch of the Vatican, they were a group referred to as the Legion of Christ. To the unassuming public, they're a success story, a group of devoted Catholic priests, scholar and missionaries, working beneath Father Maciel, a 'success' story of a poor Mexican child who rose to power through the church. However, the Legion of Christ's main function is to train and develop soldiers for the Vatican, for use in the clandestine operations they partake in throughout the world. They even have wizards among

them, muggleborns trained from birth to fight in the name of their God."

"Work of our nature is frowned upon by the Vatican," Sylvia explained. "When we changed the path of reality, the Vatican discovered our interference. That night we essentially signed our own death notices; it just took eight years for them to find us."

"Were you part of a cult?" Harry asked, reminded of the B-grade films he sometimes saw on TV late at night while at the orphanage

"What is a cult?" Crowley asked, a slight smile upon his lips. "Perhaps some would have labeled us as such, but the sole difference between a cult and a 'faith' is the amount of people who prescribe to its teachings. So, I suppose at one time we may have been a 'cult', but sadly, Sylvia and I are the sole survivors."

"If you cared for Harry so much, why didn't you try to contact Harry yourselves?" Perenelle asked, seemingly skeptical of their claims.

"We just barely escaped the Legion's grasp, and were forced to go deep into hiding. They were not pleased with our escape, and have been hunting us ever since. Even now, we take a tremendous risk in coming here, but we had finally reached a point where the gain became more urgent than the risk involved."

"Also, there was the matter of Harry's mind," Sylvia added. "Confined to hiding, we weren't able to track him. Even when reports of Harry taking residence in France arose, since we never received any letters, it seemed apparent that his mind had been under attack, and he walled up his memories. We were aware that the Sorting Hat could see through Occlumency barriers, so it was more logical for us to wait further until the Legoin's presence in Britain decreased further, since at some point the Hat would have given Harry the code to the vault. When we received the letter, it was clear the time had come."

Harry didn't know what to think of what he was being told. For all they had said, they hadn't given a great deal of information about themselves. Looking at his guardians, he saw that both Perenelle and Nicolas didn't look exactly enamored with the explanations themselves.

"How are we to know if you are telling the truth?" Nicolas asked distrustfully.

Crowley grinned humorlessly at the challenge.

"Within this room is one of the world's most accomplished Legilimens. Perhaps you should ask him?"

Dumbledore shook his head slightly.

"While an accomplished enough Occlumens can lie with impunity, based upon my observations, I believe most of what we've heard today is truth."

"Indeed we have," Crowley stated, before glancing at the time. "With that said, I am starting to grow uncomfortable with the time we've spent here, exposed. Before we leave though, Harry, you must know that while we do have the ability to restore your memories, it will be a long and arduous process, during which you will learn secrets you will be unable to share with anyone else."

Perenelle went to object, but Sylvia raised her arms, imploring for a chance to explain themselves.

"We do not mean to cut you out, only to emphasize the magnitude of the situation. This is something that is going to require careful deliberation by all parties, and know that we will not begrudge any of you regardless of your decision."

Moving closer to Harry, she leaned down towards him.

"Most importantly, I'm just glad to see that you've found people who genuinely care for you, Harry. It does my heart good."

Harry didn't know if he could say the same. Sure, he had learned some things, but then again...

Just how fucked up had his childhood been?

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

After Harry's two mysterious benefactors had made their exit, an awkward silence descended over the room at their return. Each person, himself included, withdrawn into their own thoughts.

How the hell could have Dumbledore have left him with those bastards? Yeah, maybe a bunch of Voldemort's followers were still out there, wanting to avenge their master...but surely there had been a better option than a muggle home? As powerful as the blood wards may have been, were they really that much safer than the protection that a fortified wizarding home could provide?

And what about his living conditions? Surely if Dumbledore had ever bothered to check up him, he would have seen something was clearly wrong? So what the fuck? McGonagall had even warned him about how badly it may have been, but it had done no good. How did this make any sense?

Looking up, he took a glance at Dumbledore, who was conversing in hushed tones with Perenelle and Nicolas. Judging by Perenelle's frantic whisperings and hand motions, she was far from pleased. The Headmaster himself had a mild look upon his face, as if Perenelle was some mildly interesting creature, a fact that drove Harry spare.

Did this man even care what may have happened? Honestly, Harry couldn't answer the question. While doubtless Dumbledore had done great things, chief among them saving him from Voldemort's possession on two separate occasions...what drove him? When Harry had brought up Malfoy's indiscretions, Dumbledore hadn't lifted a finger. Yet, when proven wrong, he had made sure that Malfoy was expelled.

Did anything make sense anymore? Could he really, truly trust Dumbledore?

Across the room, he saw Perenelle break from her discussion, and send a glance towards Harry. Her eyes were soft, sad, as if she felt badly for him, but didn't know how to approach the subject, which made two of them. Regardless, if he didn't do something, they were going to start asking him how he felt, which would have been an impossibility to describe.

"So, who was Peter Pettigrew?" he asked, hoping to change the subject.

"Peter was a wizard who was sorted into Gryffindor at the same time as your father," Dumbledore answered, "and became one of his closest friends, alongside Sirius Black and another boy, Remus Lupin. Though never as talented as his friends, he remained loyal to them. It was believed that Peter tracked down Sirius and was attempting to avenge your parents' deaths when he was killed, but now I'm skeptical that's what truly happened."

"What did the witnesses say?"

"The story remained consistent from everyone there who survived. Apparently, Peter was yelling at Sirius, wand drawn, asking him why he did it. A large blast then tore through the street, starting where Peter had been, killing thirteen muggles. All that they ever found of Peter was a single finger."

"What did Sirius say about it?"

"Nothing," Dumbledore replied with a heavy sigh. "He never said a word in his defense, not even as the Wizengamot was sentencing him to Azkaban."

Harry found himself uneasy at Dumbledore's words. They knew Sirius hadn't betrayed the Potters, as he had switched with someone. Still, he didn't say a word in his defense. What sort of innocent man did that?

"What do you think happened?"

"I haven't the faintest idea, Harry. Though Sirius Black came from a Dark family, you would be hard pressed to find a more fiercely loyal companion, so much so that no one believed it when the story first broke. The evidence at the time seemed irrefutable...but now I find myself wondering."

"Is there anything we can do for him?"

Dumbledore sighed at his question.

"I would like nothing more than to say yes, but the odds are not in our favor. The evidence is stacked heavily against Sirius, and we don't have anything substantial that we could use to overturn the verdict."

Harry began to wrack his mind. There had to be something...

"Wait, maybe Crowley and Sylvia have something in their visions that could prove he's innocent?" Harry exclaimed excitedly.

"Perhaps, but even if they could provide some sort of illumination...the Ministry has a penchant for revisionist history. In releasing Sirius, they would be admitting a mistake, a path they would only ever take given absolutely no alternative."

Before Harry could express his frustration, Nicolas made his way over, his expression guarded.

"What were your intentions regarding Harry?" the alchemist asked, his voice level.

"Voldemort may have fallen, but his Death Eaters were still at-large. The safest place for Harry was behind blood wards, which could only be provided for at the Dursley household. The situation called for haste, so I would have done it as quickly as possible."

Even mention of the residence of his alternate self causes fresh waves of anger to roll over him. He knew it wasn't this Dumbledore that had done that...but still, it could have been.

"And after all of the Death Eaters had been accounted for?" Nicolas prodded.

"I would have probably moved Harry to another location or at the very least checked in on him once in a while, to assure that his living situation was amiable. I have no insight, nor can I fathom why my alternate self did not do any of those things."

Perenelle stepped forward, her face burning brightly.

"I...I am not happy with what I saw in those memories, seeing Harry treated with such cruelty, but after talking with my husband...I should have held my tongue."

Harry looked incredulously at his guardian. Seriously?

"Thank you, Perenelle," Dumbledore said, bowing his head slightly. "It was an emotional response, which I completely understand."

"Harry," Nicolas said, regarding him with sadness, "I understand why you'd be angry with Dumbledore right now, but you do need to realize that the man in the memories and the one before you are different."

"Yeah, I get that," he crossly replied, "but he was going to send me to live with those...monsters. If those people hadn't shown up-

"That is exactly it," Nicolas broke in. "Above all things, those people kidnapped you, Harry. Showing you those memories was a way to turn their crime into a virtuous act. They needed to paint themselves as heroes."

Harry thought for a moment, turning over the subject in his mind.

"Maybe," he reluctantly admitted, "but it doesn't matter, they did save me from the Dursleys."

"Perhaps they did," Nicolas conceded, "but how can you be certain that your childhood with them was any better. You voluntarily erased your entire past. Would you have done that if the memories were pleasant?"

The question stumped him. What information was worth hiding everything he had been through? Did he do it to protect a few secrets, or...was there another reason?

"I...I don't know," he replied, deflating as he said it. He had hoped for answers today, and everything had just become more complicated instead. Fuck.

"That is the point, Harry," Nicolas said softly. "Though our two visitors may have told the truth when asked, there was much they withheld. Until I can ascertain their true motivations..."

"I still want to learn about my past though," he insisted.

"I understand that, but there is something wrong with Crowley, something that unsettles me. I am not sure he should have access to your mind."

"But they're my only chance," Harry argued.

"Nicolas is correct," Dumbledore agreed, "I have never come across a mind so tightly coiled, so protected."

"What do you mean?"

"When talking to someone," Dumbledore explained, "there is always an emotional response to what is being said, even if it is minimal. It's reflexive, unconscious. Even the greatest of Occlumens are helpless against it."

"In all likelihood, a corpse would have had a better response," Nicolas remarked.

Dumbledore nodded.

"Indeed. The discipline, the concentration needed to conceal one's emotions so completely is unheard of. I cannot help but wonder what sorts of secrets inspire that level of dedication."

Harry narrowed his eyes at Dumbledore. What was he trying for here? Didn't he have any idea how terrible it was to have a huge, gaping hole where your past should be?

"As much as we don't trust Crowley, Harry does have a right to know what his childhood was like," Perenelle interjected.

Nicolas didn't exactly look convinced.

"Aside from the fact that, yes, I don't trust Crowley, the clandestine nature of his proposal bothers me. More than respecting Harry's privacy, it seems to be a way to cut us out, to make sure we cannot interfere."

Harry was fuming internally, being talked about like he wasn't there, but reigned in his temper.

"You don't know that he wants to hurt me," Harry reasoned.

"Nor do you," Nicolas countered. "He has given us no insight into his motivations."

"True," Perenelle conceded, "but there are many other ways to assure his intentions."

"Really?" Nicolas replied skeptically, "because I am fairly certain that Crowley would not be interested in taking any loyalty oaths."

"Probably not, but had you considered using veritaserum?"

"He would never agree to it, unless..."

"Yes?" Perenelle prompted, her victory at hand.

"Unless we took an oath limiting the question range to matters pertaining to Harry's safety."

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

"I, Nicolas Flamel, do solemnly vow to limit the range of my questioning to matters regarding Harry's welfare, upon pain of torture."

After repeating the vow his wife had taken a mere minute ago, narrow bands of crimson light encircled the alchemist, before contracting, disappearing into his body. The oath completed, Nicolas pointed toward the vial of clear liquid upon the table.

"Your turn," Nicolas stated humorlessly, his face grave.

Though Nicolas had agreed to let Harry go through with the session, he clearly was still uncomfortable with it. For this reason, instead of the follow-up meeting occurring at the Flamel Manor, again they had met at the Leaky Cauldron.

"Very well," Crowley replied, undoing the stopper on the vial, and carefully placing three drops upon his tongue. His eyes growing glassy, he quickly handed the vial off to Sylvia. She gazed at it mistrustfully for a moment, before shrugging and following her companion's example.

"Have either of you taken any potions or other aids that would counteract the effects of veritaserum?"

"No," their voices rang out hollowly, in chorus.

"Well, as much as I would like to trust you two," Nicolas remarked, slightly venomously, "I do not believe I shall be taking your word for it."

Withdrawing his wand, the alchemist waved it across the two visitors. Sylvia recoiled slightly, but Crowley remained stoic as a white light washed over them, before quickly fading.

"The fact that you both are not using any outside aids in an encouraging start," Nicolas remarked brightly, his good cheer returning. "Where were we? Ah yes."

With a flourish, he pocketed his wand, before resuming the questioning.

"Is Crowley's Occlumency capable of withstanding the effects of veritaserum?"

"Yes."

Harry looked at the two strangers, shocked by the reply. Was this meeting even going to happen? Looking to Nicolas, he was surprised to note that Nicolas looked satisfied by the answer.

"Would I be correct in assuming that Sylvia's Occlumency is not strong enough to withstand veritaserum?"

"Yes."

"That does provide a measure of comfort. Very well then. Do either of you mean any harm to Harry?"

"No."

"If you give Harry information about his past, could it indirectly cause him harm?"

"Yes."

Harry groaned at the answer, feeling his chances at finding out about his past slimming.

"Will you put forth every effort into protecting Harry?"

"Yes."

Nicolas nodded at the answer, apparently pleased with it. Glancing at the wall, he sighed, before turning to Harry.

"The veritaserum is about to wear off. I am still not comfortable with this arrangement, as it gives them far too much leeway...but at least these two do not mean you any harm. Please be careful, Harry."

"The last thing we want is for Harry to get hurt," Sylvia said dreamily, the effects of the truth potion fading.

Nicolas ignored her and turned to his wife.

"Do you still think we are doing the right thing by allowing this?"

"I am not sure anymore," she admitted, obviously conflicted on the issue. "If Harry wants to learn about his past, I really do not think it is our place to say he cannot."

"Yeah, I still want to," Harry confirmed, speaking up.

"Very well," Nicolas replied. "As we discussed before, we will be waiting in the next room. If anything goes wrong, you know what to do."

Harry gave a curt nod. He most certainly did. Nicolas had made him promise that if anything went wrong, he would cast a noise-maker. Even with the privacy charms within the room, the cannon blast of sound would easily reach the ears of the Flamels.

Satisfied, Nicolas opened the door, holding it open for his wife. He was left waiting, however, as Perenelle leaned down and gave him a tight hug.

"Good luck, Harry," she whispered into his ear.

"Thanks."

She then let him go, almost reluctantly, before walking out the door.

"You have one hour," Nicolas reminded, before closing the door behind him. As it did, his heart rate began to increase. This was the moment he had been waiting for.

"Please, have a seat," Sylvia said, motioning to a chair across the table from her. He did as instructed, still slightly overwhelmed that only a year ago, he thought all answers had been lost forever.

"Are you...I mean, did you two really raise me?"

"Well...." Sylvia began, "not exactly. Growing up, there wasn't really one person that could be isolated as a parent. Your raising was more of a communal situation."

"So I lived with a bunch of people?"

"Yes," she replied with a nod of her head. "In the house we lived, the same one within your mind, at one point there were fifteen people living there."

"That seems like too many," Harry commented, thinking of the space within his mind.

"Well, that was at its most crowded, and keep in mind that all the children's rooms were in the attic."

While Harry certainly didn't recall an attic, the other morsel of information was far more interesting.

"Wait, did I have any brothers or sisters?"

Sylvia smiled at his question.

"Not by blood, but for all intents and purposes, you did. You were the youngest of four children."

"Were they...like me?" he asked, opting to not ask if they were kidnapped as well.

Crowley shook his head slightly at his unsaid words, while Sylvia shook her head empathically.

"You were a unique situation, Harry. Kidnapping wasn't an ordinary thing for us. No, the rest of the children there were born there."

"Oh. I just thought...I mean, I spent a lot of time there, and never saw any kids rooms."

"As a precaution, all the children slept in the attic, safely concealed. If we were ever attacked, at least the children would have been safe. At least that's what we thought..."

Sylvia trailed off, the ghost of painful memories dwelling in her eyes. Swallowing heavily, she continued.

"Despite the kidnapping, and the occasionally unpleasant details of your childhood – we are not bad people, Harry. We merely wanted to prepare-"

"Sylvia," Crowley chastised sharply, cutting her off. "We must take this slow."

For a moment, her lips drew back in a snarl of dislike, before she masked her anger quickly.

"Forgive me," she remarked, her voice anything but apologetic. "We wanted only good things for you."

"Well, was it better than the Dursleys?"

"Of course!" Sylvia exclaimed. "Granted, it wasn't all roses, but overall you're in a much better place now."

"So, can you start to show me?" he asked hopefully. At his question, the two adults spared a glance. Sylvia broke it first, with a sharp nod.

"We can, but it will not be an easy process. Though it was a much happier childhood than the one you experienced at the Dursleys, it was not without its trauma. If we were to heap it upon you all at once, the emotional weight may damage your mind. We're going to have to restore it piece-by-piece."

Harry couldn't help but be slightly disappointed by her words.

"How long will it take?"

Sylvia looked at him with sympathy.

"I'm so sorry Harry, but this is going to take a long, long time. I wish we could give you quick answers to everything, but your mind simply isn't ready for everything."

Harry looked at her skeptically. He knew occlumency, had been possessed by Voldemort, seen a classmate die, and had almost been killed by Voldemort again. Didn't that count for anything?

"Harry, how do you think you would handle coming face-to-face with the thing behind the black door?" Crowley asked suddenly, his expression slightly bored.

"That's enough," Sylvia snapped angrily at her companion. "Are you trying to scare him?"

"Wha...what is that thing?" Harry asked, his voice barely louder than a whisper.

"In our dreams, we are in worlds comprised solely within our minds," Crowley explained. "During this time, we are more susceptible to outside influences, as the realm of dreams is closer to the Sitra Ahra than the mortal plane is."

"I thought we agreed to take this slow," Sylvia said, sending a glare at her companion.

"We did, my apologies," he said lightly, before focusing his attention back on Harry. "Just think of it as your subconscious, a part of your former memories that proved impossible to lock away. Only in your dreams could it call out to you."

"I guess that makes sense," Harry said, still slightly confused, "but what is the Sitra Ahra?"

"All in due time," Crowley remarked, "but if we are to eventually get there, I must arrange your memories into a more manageable format."

"Um, okay, how?"

"Well, with your permission, I would tie every memory of your past to a specific combination of the vault in the basement. Every week or two I could owl you a different combination, allowing you to slowly access your childhood."

"Won't that take a really long time?"

"Indeed it will," Crowley confirmed, "but your options in this situation are very simple, as I refuse to put your mind and sanity at risk. Either the memories are restored slowly, or they remain forever hidden."

Harry crossed his arms, unhappy with the ultimatum he was being given. Then again, what choice did he have?

"We wish there was an easier way," Sylvia admitted, "but sadly, we have no other choice."

Her words were the same as Crowley, but delivered with genuine regret behind them. Sylvia at least seemed to understand the frustration he felt, even if there was nothing she could do about it. Well, it wasn't like the deal was going to get any better.

"Okay, let's do it," Harry said, hoping that he wasn't making a mistake.

"Very well then," Crowley replied, drawing his wand.

"Legilimens!"

X-X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The room, which Callie referred to as the "think room", was tiny. Its walls were featureless, just an expanse of pale white broken only by a single window. There was a small table in the room, at which were two chairs. Sitting in the smaller one, Harry's dangling feet didn't even touch the floor.

Across from him Callie sat, looking down upon him. Her normally kind face, framed by long brunette locks, was fixed in a frown.

"I don't wanna do this no more," Harry said, leaning to the side as he spoke. The room was boring, the picture was boring. The only interesting thing was the window. Bright sunlight shone through it. Probably one of the last good days left before winter came, and he was stuck here.

"Harry, we had a deal," Callie said, brushing her hair back over her ear.

"No! This is boring!" Harry yelled, trying to kick the table. It was out of his reach, but he gave it an honest effort.

"Well, you would have already been outside if you had been good," Callie said.

"But I hate this," Harry pouted. "I did this yesterday, and the day before that."

"No," she said with a shake of her head, "the past two days you merely pouted, and did everything else but look at the picture. If you don't do it today, you'll be back here tomorrow."

"Another day!"

"However" she continued, as if he had said nothing, "if you are good for the next hour, I will let you go outside."

Harry looked up at her compromise, his eyes hopeful.

"Really? You promise?"

Callie nodded.

"I promise Harry, but it has to be an hour."

Unlike some of others ones, Callie was nice. If she promised something, she meant it.

"Okay, okay," he said, looking downwards at the table. Upon it was a large picture, of what looked like random shapes and loops. Sighing, he began to stare at the picture, narrowing his eyes.

Moving closer, he began to breathe deeply, as Callie had taught him to. She said it helped the brain, which seemed weird, but it did help.

The picture grew larger before him, taking up his entire world. He did want to look at the window, but if he did, maybe Callie wouldn't let him go outside. No, he had to finish this. Slowly, he began to forget about going outside, the window, the room, Callie. His entire world was the picture. Straining his eyes, he began to look through the curves, the strange shapes, searching for the things that were supposed to be hidden. Where were they?

"Find anything, Harry?" Callie asked, pulling him roughly back to reality.

"No," he replied sadly. Now she definitely wasn't going to let him outside.

"Harry, Harry," she said softly. "It's okay that you didn't see anything, I know that you tried, and that's the important part. We can go outside if you promise to try even harder tomorrow."

"I promise!" Harry exclaimed, crossing his hand over his heart.

"Well, I'm convinced," she said with a smile, getting up.

Harry jumped down from his chair, and ran towards the door. Callie was really nice. He was going to have to work extra hard tomorrow for her.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

With a shake of his head, Harry departed the memory, with more questions than answers.

"What was that?" Harry asked of Crowley, who was leaning against the wall, merely observing.

"Teaching a child occlumency is not an easy task," Crowley replied dismissively. "Even the mere act of concentration is an arduous task to a four year-old, but we had to start somewhere."

"There was nothing hidden within the picture, was there?"

"There was not," Crowley confirmed, "but it was there that you took your first steps towards mastering your mind, the first significant event of your childhood."

"Who's Callie?"

"She was one of the people who lived amongst us. Callie had a gift with younger children, a patience that made her your sole teacher for the first few years."

It had been obvious Callie had a gift. In the memory, he had felt a certain trust towards her, that everything she had said was correct.

"What happened to her?"

"That's a memory for another day," Crowley said quickly replied, shutting the door on the matter. "Are you ready to return?"

At his nod, the world began to disintegrate around him, leaving behind only darkness. Opening his eyes, the familiar room within the Leaky Cauldron met his sight. Sylvia, who appeared to have been pacing the room, retook her seat upon noticing his open eyes.

"How are you feeling?"

"Um, fine, I guess," Harry replied. "I was expecting something a lot worse."

"Well, like we said before, this is going to be a slow process," she explained. "Granted, this memory doesn't exactly require a long recuperation period, so we'll probably owl you the next combination in about a week."

"I don't know how this is going to work," Harry said. "What am I supposed to say to my friends about these letters? I don't want to lie to them, but you made me promise I wouldn't tell them anything..."

"We understand," Sylvia replied. "Take out a subscription to the Quibbler. Every issue, we'll publish the next combination, in an ad advertising a flat in Diagon Alley."

"Um, okay," Harry said hesitantly. "Why the Quibbler?"

"Aside from being the only truly independent wizarding publication," Crowley explained, "their advertising base is very small, which means the Minsitry's regulatory commissions typically ignore its finances."

"Basically, we want the smallest paper trail possible," Sylvia summarized.

"That seems a little...paranoid," Harry remarked.

"We consider it a matter of prudence," Crowley retorted. "With the proliferation of corruption within the Ministry, it's not a stretch to assume that the Legion may be paying off members of the Ministry for access to their financial records."

"Oh."

Looking up, Harry saw that the clock was about to reach the one hour mark. Their time was almost up.

"As you've noticed, our time here has almost come to a close," Crowley said, watching his eyes. "This will be the last time you see us for a long time. Do you have anything else you'd like to ask us?"

"What if I have questions about my memories?"

"I'm sorry," Sylvia replied, honest regret upon her face, "but we're going to have to find a new hiding place, where we won't be able to receive any incoming mail. You're going to be on your own, Harry."

"Will I ever see you again?" he asked, his feelings conflicted. Granted, he didn't know these people at all...but they were the sole link to his past that remained.

"Yes, certainly," Sylvia assured, "there are just other matters we must attend to."

At her words, they both rose from the table.

"What if I can't handle the memories, though?"

Smiling, Sylvia placed a hand upon his shoulder.

"Harry, I've never met a stronger child. If we didn't think you could handle these memories, we would have never provided them. No, you're going to do just fine, I know it. Farewell, Harry."

Her eyes beginning to glisten, she turned away, making her exit. Crowley gave him a curt nod, before following his companion out.

Standing alone in the room, doubt began to creep in. Despite Sylvia's assurances, if some of the memories were as bad as Crowley hinted...

How the hell was he going to handle them on his own?

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

If there was one decisive advantage the wizarding world had over the muggle one, Harry had just decided that it was storage space.

In preparation for tomorrow's trip to King Crossing, he had already packed all of his muggle clothes, school robes, potion ingredients, cauldron, books (including the ridiculous amount required by Lockhart) and his broom. Had he forgotten anything?

His thoughts were interrupted by a light knocking at his closed door. Definitely Perenelle.

"Come in," he said loudly. As the door opened, his guess was confirmed.

"How goes the great undertaking?" she asked, closing the door behind her.

"Good," he replied, staring down at the trunk upon his bed. "I'm just trying to figure out if I forgot anything."

"Well, even if you did, I am confident you will remember before you leave tomorrow morning," she encouraged, sitting down next to the trunk. "You have a mind like a griffin's beak, Harry. You do not forget anything."

"Except for the stuff I try to forget," Harry remarked. It had been a week since his meeting with Crowley and Sylvia, but the new weekly

edition of the Quibbler did not come out until Wednesday, much to his disappointment.

"That is actually what I want to talk to you about," Perenelle said carefully.

"I'm sorry," Harry replied regretfully, "but I can't talk about it."

The more he thought about it, the more it bothered him. They were basically monopolizing his childhood, putting filters on it. He could understand wanting to protect their secrets...but it wasn't a secret that he knew occlumency. Why should he have to keep the details of the training to himself?

"I know that," she reassured, "but I also know that you were put in a difficult position."

Harry nodded glumly at her statement.

"So," she continued, "though you may not be able to actually talk about the particulars of the memory, it would only be natural if you had emotional responses to them, correct?"

"Yeah, I would," he admitted, beginning to see where Perenelle was going with this.

"Of course you would," Perenelle agreed. "So, keep in mind, whenever you feel like the pressure of everything is becoming unbearable, I am here to talk about it."

"Thanks," he said, sending a small smile in her direction.

"Remember, any time, Harry."

Rising from the bed, she made her way to the door.

"Ah yes, please do not forget to pack your winter gloves," she said with a smile, before exiting the room.

Grinning, Harry rummaged in the closet, eventually finding the thick gloves at the bottom. Unceremoniously, he tossed them into the trunk, thinking about Perenelle's words. Above being a simple

gesture of kindness, he assumed that his guardian also wanted to put her husband's mind at ease.

Since his second meeting with Sylvia and Crowley, Nicolas had seemed rather withdrawn. Though he was quick with a joke as usual, it almost seemed as if he was forcing it. Also, the alchemist spent even more time in his laboratory than normal. Nicolas never actually came out and said it, but Harry strongly believed that Nicolas deeply regretted that haste had led to giving Crowley further access to his mind.

Nicolas had initially made no secret of his dislike for Crowley and his secrets, but as of late he had been keeping his thoughts to himself. Maybe if Perenelle kept him informed of his emotional responses, he would begin to feel more comfortable about the slow unlocking of his memories.

Then again, maybe not.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Author Notes:

This was supposed to include one more scene, but I just couldn't get it to work, and was impatient to post the chapter. It will resurface later this year, however, and detail the plight of a character we haven't seen much of since the first chapter.

I know the first glimpse into Harry's past wasn't exactly groundbreaking, but it's going to occur in chronological fashion. As such, at such a young age, the people watching over him could do little more than begin to work towards their goals regarding Harry.

Any comments, suggestions or criticisms would be deeply appreciated. Even a quick "I liked it," or, "it sucked" will suffice. I'll make an effort to answer every review I get. Thanks to all that have reviewed, it has kept me writing as opposed to playing Bioshock 2, which I've vastly enjoying so far.

Thanks to my co-conspirator, mira mirth, for her valuable assistance with plotting, characterization, continuity and grammar. Her efforts save me a ridiculous amount of time with the editing process, and

are deeply appreciated. Without her, this story would have many more technical problems. Also thanks to Ellisande and scaryisntit.

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Eighteenth Movement: An Eclectic Manner

September 1, 1992

"Please, please stay safe this year," Perenelle urged whilst embracing Harry, squeezing him tightly.

"Smothering him to death would not be a promising start," Nicolas mused.

"Feel free to ignore the comedic prodigy," she replied, not loosening her grip. "Do not hesitate to write us if you need anything. Anything, Harry."

"I won't," he assured, fully interpreting her message. He still hadn't fully decided if he would take her up on the offer, but if the memories proved to be too much...then he probably would.

After exchanging his final farewells with the Flamels, Harry began to make his way through the platform. King Crossing was sparsely populated at this time of morning, which suited him just fine. Lugging his trunk through the crowds of people at term's end was one of his least favorite things to do.

With his early arrival, once again he had his choice of compartment. Boarding the train, he went all the way to the back, taking the rear compartment. He quickly hoisted his stuff onto the overhead racks, marveling at the wonders of the feather light charm, before taking a seat. Putting his hands behind his head, he relaxed, waiting for his friends to arrive.

Hermione and Tracey arrived together, already bickering with one another.

"Already?" Harry asked, mock exasperation in his voice.

"Yes, already," Tracey snapped

"Did you two plan to get here at the same time, so you could start arguing right away?"

"No," Hermione corrected sharply, "once we got on the train, Tracey seemed to have an issue with the fact I was excited for Defense this year."

"Of course I did!" Tracey exclaimed. "Lockhart's a fraud, which should have been obvious after reading even one of his books!"

"He is not!"

"Wait; hold on," Harry broke in. "You two waited until actually getting on the train to fight?"

Tracey and Hermione both turned to him, glaring daggers.

"No, this is progress," he clarified. "That means you went at least a minute without arguing. That's great!"

Before the two girls could retort, the door opened again, admitting Neville.

"What's going on guys?" he asked, glancing warily at the tense faces of the two girls.

"Oh, you're missing a great debate on the merits of Gilderoy Lockhart," Harry quickly replied.

Neville grimaced.

"Well, in that case, does anyone know how to cast a deafness spell?"

Harry laughed at his comment, even the girls were helpless to hide their grins.

"Truce?" Hermione asked with a shrug.

"I suppose," Tracey replied with a shrug, "but we really need to work on our arguing. It's getting far too easy for Neville to distract us."

"It's a gift," Neville deadpanned, drawing snickers from everyone.

"I think we'll be alright as long as Harry is still around to antagonize us," Hermione said with a grin.

He took a small bow from his seated position.

"I'm here to help."

"Oh, great," Tracey said with uncharacteristic enthusiasm, "then you'll help us store our trunks?"

"And by help, she means do it completely," Millicent added, stepping into the compartment. She placed her trunk at his feet, looking at him expectantly.

"I am not a house-elf," Harry declared, crossing his arms.

"So, Hermione," Millicent began, turning to her friend, "what was your favorite part of Gadding with Ghouls? Mine was when-"

"I surrender!" Harry exclaimed, getting up.

"Thank you," Millicent said sweetly, sitting on the opposite side of the compartment.

"This is asinine," Harry fumed, withdrawing his wand. "Am I the only one who knows the featherlight charm?"

"Probably," Neville offered, "I know I couldn't get it to work."

Shrugging, Harry cast the charm on the trunk, before placing it on the racks. Neville, taking pity upon him, helped him get the other two girls' trunks up as well.

"Do you think they have any morals at all?" Harry asked after hoisting up the final trunk.

"Maybe some," Neville replied while sitting down. "After all, they haven't started talking about Lockhart."

"Touché," he replied, moving over the door, pointing his wand at it.

"Sera!"

"What was that?" Hermione asked as the grey spell hit the door, clearly intrigued.

"Well, I don't know about you guys, but I'm sick of idiots ruining our trips on the Express. Any objections?"

Unsurprisingly, there were none.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

As the ride progressed, each one of Harry's friends described their relatively uneventful summers. When it came to be his turn, he briefly considered telling his friends about his past, but ultimately decided not to. While Crowley and Sylvia had made him promise to say nothing to anyone else, the factor that ultimately stilled his hand was that he didn't really have the complete picture. At this point, what could he really tell them?

Having nothing further to say, it passed onto Tracey.

"You know, it's strange," she began. "Last year, I really was thinking about leaving Hogwarts behind, going back to secondary school. But after a week at home..."

"You started to miss magic pretty quickly, didn't you?" Hermione asked, a note of familiarity in her voice.

"Yeah, I did," she admitted, almost sheepishly. "I tried to bury myself in magic, reading books, going over wand movements...but it just wasn't the same. It really felt like a part of me was missing."

Tracey stopped for a moment, letting out a sigh before continuing.

"It was even more than that, though. Even my old friends, after spending a year at Hogwarts, they almost feel like strangers to me. Not being able to tell them exactly what I was up to...it changed things. It was like there was an invisible barrier between us. Even though the wizarding world has some huge problems, it's beginning to feel like home to me."

"I know what you're talking about," Hermione added. "When I wanted to light a candle, it just felt wrong using a lighter, when I had a perfectly good wand in my pocket."

"Yeah, the whole 'underage magic laws' are pure bullshit," Tracey observed, turning to the other three. "Let me guess: you guys were free to practice magic over the summer?"

Almost guiltily, Harry nodded, with Millicent and Neville doing the same.

"I mean, I'd do the same thing if I could," Tracey clarified, "I don't blame you guys or anything, it just sucks for Hermione and myself. I already feel like I'm behind from not being able to practice."

"You'll do fine," Neville reassured, "you always were one of the best in class. Maybe next year all of us can spend a week at my place? It would give us a good chance to practice."

"Yeah, that'd be really great," she replied, smiling at Neville. Beginning to blush, he opened his mouth to reply, but a light knock at the door cut him off.

"If it was one of those idiots who always seem to show up, I think they would have pounded on the door," Millicent observed.

Agreeing with her, Harry rose to his feet, casting a whispered unlocking charm on the door. He cautiously opened it, revealing a tiny girl.

"This doesn't appear to be the bathroom," the girl observed, looking around the compartment beyond with a wide-eyed curiosity. Though roughly the same height as Tracey, she was much frailer, looking as if a strong wind would take her away. Long, scraggly blond hair reached almost to her waist.

"It doesn't," Harry agreed with a smile. "The nearest bathroom is seven compartments down," he explained, pointing down the hallway.

"Oh," she replied lightly, staring at his uniform with unblinking eyes. "How did you manage to break the brain-stem curse?"

"I...uh, what?" Harry asked unintelligently, feeling rather lost.

"Well," she began, pointing towards his green and silver tie, "centuries ago, Salazar Slytherin placed a curse on the Sorting Hat.

Whenever a student was placed in Slytherin, the Hat made their brain-stem heavier, pushing their nose permanently into the air."

Unable to formulate a response, Harry merely continued to stare at the odd girl. What the hell was she talking about?

"Don't worry," she continued, giving him a light pat on the arm, "you seem to be okay, so maybe the Hat figured out how to break the curse."

Without further comment, the girl turned away and began skipping down the hall, whistling an unfamiliar tune. Shaking his head, not exactly sure how to react, Harry closed the door. Upon turning around, his friends let out the laughter they had been holding in and began cracking up.

"I am so glad I didn't answer the door," Tracey said between guffaws.

"Yeah, I don't even know what that was," Harry said, sitting down amidst the dying laughter.

No one else had an answer either.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

"Firs' years over 'ere!" Hagrid's voice rang out through the night air, echoing across Hogsmeade station. As the younger students gravitated towards the voice, it struck Harry that they wouldn't be taking the boats across the lake this time around.

As he watched them migrate, he noticed the young, odd blonde girl flagging considerably behind the other students, struggling with a trunk that looked nearly as big as her.

"I guess no one told you, but you're supposed to leave the trunks on the train."

"Well, that would explain why no one else has theirs," she replied, before beginning to drag her trunk back towards the train.

Taking pity upon the young girl, he withdrew his wand, and cast a feather-light charm upon her trunk. She stumbled with the sudden weight change, before glancing backwards.

"Thank you so much," she said, before tilting her head to the side, seemingly contemplating him. "You seem far too nice to be a cold-blooded killer. Perhaps they were wrong."

Before Harry could even react, the girl turned and made her way over to Hagrid. He merely stood for a moment, slightly shocked by her words. A cold blooded-killer? Who were 'they'?"

Shaking his head, he walked back towards his friends, who were still just standing around.

"Where do you think everyone else goes?" Neville asked, looking around the platform.

"We could just follow the other older students," Hermione suggested.

Slightly surprised he hadn't thought of it first, they followed Hermione's suggestion. Their path took them down a dark road, each side lined with tall pine trees, obscuring the already scant light from the skies above. Further down the road widened into a large clearing containing a large grouping of carriages, which the older students appeared to be getting into. This, however, became a minor detail in Harry's eyes, as what was drawing the carriages drew his full attention.

The closest comparison that he could make was to horses, but even that was a stretch. These things had bright, shining white eyes without pupils. Their bodies were black and skeletal, whilst large bat-like wings sprouted from their backs. In short, they looked like something out of a nightmare.

"What are those things?" Harry asked disgustedly, pointing at them.

"Um, I believe they're called 'carriages'," Tracey said sarcastically.

"No, the things in front of them," Harry testily replied.

"I...I don't see anything," Hermione said, following his line of sight with her eyes.

Harry turned and looked for any sign of jest in her gaze, but all he found was honest confusion. What the hell? Was he going crazy?

"You're not crazy, they're just thestrals," a familiar voice spoke from behind him. Turning, he saw the thin, reedy form of Theodore Nott.

"What?" Harry asked again, still bewildered by the sight.

"Thestrals," Nott repeated wearily, as if disappointed, before making his way towards the nearest carriage.

As Nott disappeared within the carriage, Harry found himself getting frustrated. How the fuck was he supposed to know what these 'thestrals' were?

"Come on," Hermione said, tugging on his arm slightly. Shaken from his wanderings, Harry allowed himself to be lead to a nearby carriage.

"What did you see?" Hermione asked him as soon as he sat down, her voice concerned.

Feeling out of sorts, Harry described what he had seen. Tracey shook her head following his explanation.

"This...this doesn't make any sense."

"They're real," Harry insisted.

"I believe you," she replied, "since Nott seemed to see them as well, and even had a name for them."

"Thestrals," Hermione supplied.

"I was there, I heard it," Tracey remarked icily, "but still. Why would a creature be invisible to most people?"

They chewed over the subject for a short while longer, but got no closer to an answer. More than anything, though, Harry was grateful his friends were taking his claim seriously, as opposed to dismissing it as a hallucination or something.

"Why did that weird girl call you a killer?" Millicent asked, changing the subject.

"Who knows?" Harry said with a shrug. "Maybe she's been reading the Daily Prophet's gossip page."

"No, I don't think so," Hermione disagreed, "the Prophet has hinted at things, but never come out and called you a 'cold-blooded killer'. No, it was probably someone on board the train that told her."

"Maybe those idiots in Gryffindor are trying to turn new students against you?" Tracey threw out.

Hermione let out an indignant huff at the generalization, Millicent nodded.

"They did warn us last year," she reasoned, before turning to Hermione and Neville. "You two really need to watch out for yourselves this year."

Hermione looked ready to argue the point, but was distracted by the carriage coming to a stop. Looking out the window, Harry saw that they were at the foot of the stone steps that sloped upwards to the main entrance of Hogwarts. Leaving the carriage behind Harry and his friend climbed the stairs, a mere small part of the sea of students flowing through the large doorway, their footfalls on the flagged stone echoing throughout the entryway.

Entering into the Great Hall, he was unnerved by the sheer number of evil glares directed in him. Had he been elected school pariah or something?

"Potter!" a loud, booming voice thundered behind him. Turning, he saw the hulking form of the Slytherin Quidditch Captain, Marcus Flint, moving towards him. Students shrank from his mere presence, making a clear path for him.

"Welcome back," Flint roared, greeting him with a monstrous handshake. Smiling in spite of the vise-grip crushing his hand, Harry was glad to see the psychotic captain again, if nothing else for protection's sake.

"It's good to have our Captain back."

Flint scowled at his comment.

"They let me back, but I ain't Captain anymore...well, not officially," he finished with a grin.

Looking around, Harry saw Higgs slinking his way over to the Slytherin table, as if trying not to be noticed.

"I guess they also let that sorry excuse for a Seeker back as well," Harry said loudly, motioning in Higgs' direction, who grew slightly red at the jab.

"That cunt," Flint snorted derisively, "I'm goin' to kill him the first chance I get."

As Higgs paled visibly, Flint winked conspiratorially at Harry, before sitting down. With slight amusement, he noted that it was hard to tell if Flint was serious or not. Chuckling lightly to himself, he sat down beside his two friends in Slytherin. To his surprise, while the rest of the school seemed to have an issue with him, that same attitude did not hold within his own House. Slytherins he had barely exchanged words with greeted him enthusiastically.

Right after Derrick had clapped him on the back, Harry turned to his two friends.

"This is a bit...different."

"Maybe last year's good will from the last Quidditch match carried over," Tracey offered with a shrug.

"Maybe," he replied, watching the incoming first-years shuffle towards the front of the Great Hall, fear and wonder in their eyes. Just a year ago it had been him in that same place, wondering where the Sorting Hat was going to send him. Before their looks of bewilderment, McGonagall placed the Sorting Hat upon the waiting stool. As its brim ripped wide open Harry tuned out the song, and began to study the first-years.

Opposed to the looks of anticipation and fear upon the faces of the students, the odd blonde girl merely looked around, as if mildly interested by the surrounding events. Looking around, he saw another first-year, a blonde boy, had a camera strapped around his neck. Apparently no one had told him muggle devices didn't work at

Hogwarts. Unsurprisingly, a great deal of the students looked at the Slytherin table with trepidation.

It took him a moment, but he realized that of all tables, the Slytherin table had noticeably fewer students than the other Houses. With Draco and his goons gone, it left only six second-years within Slytherin. Even the muggleborns might notice the lack of students at the table.

"Look, there's your future husband," Tracey said to Millicent, pointing at the staff table. At the far right sat Gilderoy Lockhart, in resplendent mauve robes, smiling brightly at the incoming children.

Millicent glared at Tracey, but took it no further, instead opting to pay attention to the song.

Polite applause echoed out over the Great Hall as the Sorting Hat's song concluded, which Harry added to mechanically. With a final look over the four tables to quell any whispering, Professor McGonagall looked down towards the list within her hands.

"Bradley, Farren."

A small, dark-haired boy moved toward the stool, gingerly placing the Sorting Hat upon his head.

"Ravenclaw!"

Placing the hat back on the stool, the boy ran over to the appropriate table to cheers.

"Chambers, Piper."

As the red-faced, pigtailed blonde girl made her way to the hat, Harry turned to his two friends.

"Do you think first-years notice that our table has less people?" he whispered.

Millicent shook her head.

"Probably not. If they're anything like I was, they can barely notice their name when it's called."

Chambers became the year's second Ravenclaw, before McGonagall called again.

"Creevey, Colin."

Creevey turned out to be the small blonde boy with the camera. After a minute's deliberation, he became the year's first new Gryffindor, and was greeted by raucous applause from his new House.

"Say hello to your future enemy," Tracey whispered mischievously, prompting a chuckle from Harry and Millicent.

"Dorny, James," became the first new Slytherin. To the dismay of the professors, his sorting was met with hisses from the Gryffindor table, which quelled after a rage-filled, withering look from McGonagall. The transfiguration professor said nothing else, but Harry was thought that come tomorrow morning, Gryffindor might have negative House points. At the very least, she was definitely going to ream all of them out verbally.

The pale boy looked dismayed by the choice of house, prompting Harry to put in an honest effort in cheering for the boy, who brightened slightly at the support. Harry and his friends greeted him warmly, all shaking his hand before he sat, his expression no longer pained.

Onwards the Sorting marched, the reactions between the Slytherins and Gryffindors becoming increasingly heated. "Harper, Wilson," drew a particularly heated response from the Gryffindors upon being sorted into Slytherin, causing the Slytherins to respond even more enthusiastically. McGonagall looked increasingly apoplectic, as if she was considering interrupting the Sorting.

"Lovegood, Luna," she practically spat out.

The odd blonde girl immediately skipped over to the Hat, placing it upon her head.

"Her name's quite fitting," Tracey observed dryly, prompting a chuckle from Millicent.

"Ravenclaw!"

On her way to her new house, Luna favored Harry with a wave, drawing a heated look from a small red-headed girl that had yet to be sorted.

Upon "Robins, Demelza," being sorted into Gryffindor, Harry scanned the corresponding House's table. While most of the students were hugely enthusiastic in their praise, he couldn't help but notice that the Weasley twins and their younger brother Ron were rather subdued. They certainly clapped and such, but were neither enthusiastic in their welcome nor partook in the belligerence the rest of their House displayed. His heart going out to them, Harry decided that at breakfast the next morning he'd personally give his condolences to the Weasleys.

"Weasley, Ginny."

"Another one?" Tracey whispered.

A redheaded girl, the same one that had glared at Luna, rose to be sorted. The Hat had barely touched her head before she was sorted into Gryffindor, receiving the loudest applause of the Sorting. At its conclusion, Dumbledore rose from his seat at the staff table.

"There will be a time for words, but now is not that time," the Headmaster said, before food appeared on all of the tables. Loud applause and cheers met his words before the ravenous student populace tucked in.

Throughout his meal, Harry occasionally glanced at the Headmaster, trying to sort through his thoughts regarding the man. Clearly, he owed the man an enormous debt for freeing him from the thrall of the horcrux, but had Crowley not rescued him from his parent's home...he would have faced a childhood of misery. He knew on an intellectual level that the Headmaster had never actually gotten a chance to condemn him to such a terrible childhood...but still, he couldn't help but feel as if he had been betrayed in some fashion.

After the students, Harry included, had gorged themselves fit to burst, Dumbledore rose to his feet.

"Now that you've all been properly fed, I believe the time has come for a few words. First years should note that the forest on the grounds is forbidden to all pupils. I have also been asked by Mr. Filch, the caretaker, to remind you all that no magic should be used between classes in the corridors."

At mention of the reclusive caretaker, Harry thought back to last term, and the vague warning he had received. What had Filch been referring to?

"...interested in playing for their house teams should contact Madam Hooch," Dumbledore continued, "but now, allow me to introduce our new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, Professor Lockhart."

In the wake of wild praise, most of it from the female population of the school, Lockhart rose to his feet. He smiled winningly to the rest of the school, raising both hands in acknowledgement of the praise.

"What a fraud," Tracey spat.

"You may not like him," Millicent countered, "but at least he won't try to kill us like Quirrell did."

Thinking back to the summer, Harry recalled how Lockhart had thrown a tantrum when someone had threatened to upstage him. Sure, maybe he was a baby, but surely not a murderer, like Quirrell had been.

Hopefully not, anyway.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

The next morning, Harry rose early, hoping to catch the Weasleys twins early. Being one of the first students to arrive to breakfast, he quickly wolfed down a plate of eggs and kippers, keeping an eye upon the doorway.

Slowly, the Great Hall began to fill up, but still there was no sight of the Weasley twins. However, there was no shortage of Gryffindors shuffling down, almost all of which glared at him with dislike. Apparently McLaggen hadn't been bluffing: all of Gryffindor did seem to have it out for him.

Wonderful.

"Good morning," Millicent greeted, sitting next to him halfway through breakfast. "How'd the apology go?"

"Well...they haven't exactly arrived at breakfast yet," Harry admitted with a sigh.

Millicent winced, the sleepiness beginning to leave her eyes.

"I'm sorry."

"Eh, it's okay. I'm starting to think that maybe I should have planned this better. I mean, have you ever seen the Weasley twins show up to breakfast early?"

"Not really," she admitted with a shrug.

Looking away from Millicent, his gaze drifted over to the entryway, just in time to see the Weasley twins drift through the door. They both looked slightly disheveled, as if they hadn't slept a great deal. Well, now or never.

"Wish me luck," he said, getting up from the table and making his way towards the Gryffindor table. The table was nearly full, and every pair of eyes, narrowed with mistrust, followed his movements. The weight of their gazes was almost heavy, but trying to get past it, he opened his mouth to address the twins.

"What do you want, Potter?" Seamus sneered before he could begin, giving Harry pause. What the fuck was going on? Was Finnegan channeling Malfoy?

Ignoring the sandy-haired boy, he addressed the twins, who were regarding him with guarded expressions.

"Um, Fred, George, do you have a minute?"

"We have all the time in the world," Fred lightly remarked, his voice devoid of its normal playfulness.

"But," George continued, "our time is at a premium, and we really would like to fit breakfast in before the rigors of class begin."

"So if you've something to say, we'll hear it right here."

Right then.

"I...I'm very sorry about what happened to Percy," Harry said, looking the twins in the eyes. To their left, he saw Seamus began to grow red with rage, but the twins seemed somewhat assured by his words.

"Thanks," George replied.

"Um, is Ron coming down anytime soon? I'd like to talk to him as well."

"Fuck off, Potter!" Seamus snarled, losing his temper. "It's not enough for you to kill Percy, you have to taunt his family about it?"

Harry was slightly taken aback by Seamus' vehemence, which unnerved him far more than the ridiculous claim. How could anyone take such a stupid thought seriously?

Before Harry could defend himself, Fred spoke up.

"Finnegan, just stop talking," he ordered, his eyes narrowed.

"Come on, Fred!" Seamus urged his tone exasperated. "There's obviously some sort of cover-up going on here, and Dumbledore's probably the only thing keeping him out of Azkaban. We can't trust those filthy snakes-"

"Shut the fuck up!" Fred demanded, slamming his fist down on the table, spilling his juice. Seamus looked like he had more to say, but chose to keep his mouth shut.

"Thanks again," George said, turning back towards Harry, "but I think you should wait a little before talking to Ron. He's...not really handling things well."

"Um, okay," Harry agreed, before turning and walking away.

On the way back to his table, his thoughts mostly centered around Seamus, and his seemingly psychotic antics. He really seemed convinced that Harry was in some way responsible for Percy's death.

But why? Really, what the hell was going on?

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

"So, how bad do you think this is going to be?" Harry whispered.

"Well, for us, it's going to be torture," Tracey reasoned, "but for our good friend, it's going to be like ninety minute fantasy."

As Harry began to laugh uncontrollably, Millicent scowled.

"I really hate you both. Where's Hermione when I need her?"

Harry snickered loudly at Millicent's comment. When they had tried to ask Neville about Lockhart's first class, he had burst out laughing, before quelling beneath Hermione's silencing glare. Whatever had happened, it surely didn't reflect well on Lockhart.

"You know," Tracey began mischievously, "I did hear something about pixies getting the better of Lockhart during his first class."

"Lies, all lies," Millicent denied, shaking her head.

At that moment, Lockhart chose to make his appearance, making his way out of the Defense office. Clothed in bright turquoise robes, wavy blond hair styled to perfection, he looked like he was on his way to a photo shoot, as opposed to a Defense class.

Making his way to the front of the class, he cleared his throat loudly, before reaching down and plucking Daphne's copy of 'Gadding with Ghouls' from her desk. Pride bloomed out across her face at being the one Lockhart chose, causing Harry to chuckle to himself.

Lockhart held the book high, displaying his own winking, smiling picture on the front cover.

"Me," he said unnecessarily, pointing to himself and winking as well. "Gildory Lockhart, Order of Merlin, Third Class, Honorary Member of the Dark Force Defense League, and five-time winner of 'Witch

Weekly's' Most-Charming-Smile Award – but I don't talk about that. I didn't get rid of the Bandon Banshee by smiling at her!"

"You just did," Tracey said under her breath, rolling her eyes. Harry let out a snort of laughter, which seemed to satisfy Lockhart, as he didn't have to wait for anyone else to laugh.

"I see you've all bought a complete set of my books, well done. I thought we'd start today with a little quiz. Nothing to worry about - just to check how well you've read them - how much you've taken in."

As Lockhart began to pass out test papers, Harry began to wish he had actually looked at the books. He had once started to read 'Magical Me', but upon thinking of Lockhart's tantrum at Flourish and Blotts, he had rapidly found something else to do. Even if he didn't like Lockhart very much, he still did have to pass.

Upon passing out all the tests, Lockhart returned to the front of the class.

"You have forty-five minutes – start – now!"

Looking down at the paper, Harry began to read. With each passing sentence, he became more incredulous, wondering if this class was just some colossal prank.

What is Gilderoy Lockhart's favorite color? What is Gilderoy Lockhart's secret ambition? What, in your opinion, is Gilderoy's Lockhart's greatest achievement to date?

What the fuck?

Shaking his head, he glanced to the left, to see that Tracey seemed to be having similar misgivings, judging by her look of disbelief. Looking back at his paper, he decided if Lockhart wasn't going to take this seriously, neither was he.

Lockhart's favorite color? Clear. Lockhart's secret ambition? It's a secret. Lockhart's greatest achievement? Convincing the Board he could teach.

Forty-five minutes later, Lockhart collected all of the quizzes and began to read them out loud, much to Harry's amusement.

"Tut, tut – hardly any of you remembered that my favorite color is lilac. I say so in 'Year of the Yeti'. And a few of you need to read 'Wanderings with Werewolves' more carefully – I clearly state in chapter twelve that my ideal birthday gift would be harmony between all magic and non-magic peoples – though I wouldn't say no to a large bottle of Ogden's Old Firewhiskey!"

Lockhart gave the class another roguish wink, but no one even bothered to fake a laugh. Blaise, and even Daphne, were staring at him in disbelief. At that moment, Harry wished he knew how to simulate a cricket chirp with his wand. Definitely something he needed to research.

"I mean, just look at this!" Lockhart cried, looking at another quiz. "Honestly, why would anyone think my favorite color was clear?"

Flipping the page, he continued, oblivious to the fact that Harry was shaking with the effort of keeping his laughter in.

"My greatest achievement is-" Lockhart sharply cut off his reading, a look of fierce annoyance on his face, before covering it with a chuckle.

"Well, I believe that's all for today," Lockhart said, despite the fact the class still had thirty minutes left. Feeling as though he had hit the lottery, Harry wasted no time in gathering his stuff together.

"Oh, Harry," Lockhart said, just as he was ready to flee, "could you hold on a moment? I wanted to talk to you about something."

Harry, feeling wary, nodded. He should have known he wasn't going to get away so cleanly with ridiculing Lockhart.

"Do you want us to wait up for you?" Tracey whispered to him, to which Harry gave a slight nod. He didn't know Lockhart that well yet, but he did want someone outside in case things went wrong.

So far, his track record with Defense instructors was not good.

"What did you want to talk about?" Harry asked cautiously, once the room had cleared.

"Your answers on the quiz were amusing," Lockhart stated, his smile radiant as always. "That's something I would have done when I was younger. Like you, I used to be quite the hellion."

Harry shrugged.

"I didn't read the books beforehand, since I expected you'd assign reading. Since I didn't know any of it, thought I'd make you laugh."

Not exactly true, but Lockhart didn't have to know that. Not like Lockhart was telling the truth anyway. Harry had seen the annoyance in his eyes, and could tell the professor had not appreciated it.

"Though, I could not help but detect anger behind your words, Harry, which I understand. After all, I did pull the spotlight away from you at Flourish and Blotts."

"Uh, what?" Harry asked, unable to articulate anything more complex.

"Harry, Harry," Lockhart began, as if he was giving out sage-like advice, "I understand your thirst for fame, but you have to cultivate a positive image first, so that the media can't turn you into a monster."

Was this guy serious?

"Sadly, the important Wizarding publications view you as a monster, but I can help you. Would you like that?"

"Not really," Harry answered dismissively.

Lockhart looked confused by his statement.

"Why not, Harry? The things they say about you in the Prophet....rumors are a vicious thing, but they are effective at destroying a person. You're twelve years old; people already think that you might be a Dark Wizard. What are they going to be saying in a year, Harry? Two? Three? Think about it."

He really didn't want Lockhart's help, nor did he trust him...but what if he could deliver? Would people stop blaming him for Percy's death?

"What could you do?"

"Absolutely anything, if you know the right people," Lockhart replied with a wink, "which I happen to. When you become as famous as me, people are just itching to do you favors. What do you say?"

Hesitantly, Harry nodded.

"Okay, sure."

He may not like Lockhart, but if he could actually deliver on his promise, wouldn't it be worth it, despite whatever Lockhart wanted in return?

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

"Did Lockhart give you a detention?" Millicent asked earnestly upon his exit from the Defense classroom.

"No, he offered to help me," Harry sighed

"Wait, what?"

"Yeah, I know," Harry said with a shake of his head. "He said that he had friends that could make my problems with the Prophet disappear."

"Really?" Tracey asked skeptically, hands upon her hips, "and just what did he want in return?"

"He didn't really say," Harry admitted, beginning the walk towards the Charms classroom.

"And this doesn't bother you at all?"

"It kinda does, but then again, I pretty much know Lockhart isn't doing this out of the kindness of his heart. He definitely wants something from me...but if he gets the Prophet off my back, it's probably going to be worth it – whatever it is."

"Just watch yourself," she warned. "I really, really don't trust him."

"We're not talking about Quirrell here," Millicent pointed out. "You may not like him, but he's famous, and really talented. You could probably learn a lot from him."

"If you're really lucky Harry, he might show you how to curl your hair," Tracey remarked with mock enthusiasm, causing him to start laughing, despite his best efforts to hold it in.

"You both suck," Millicent said matter-of-factly, right as they entered the classroom. Due to their early release from Defense, they were the first ones to arrive. They chatted idly to fill the time until Charms began. As the minutes stretch out, the classroom slowly filled with Slytherins and Hufflepuffs.

"Welcome back to Hogwarts," the diminutive Charms instructor squeaked, perched perilously atop a stack of books behind his desk. "I trust that you have all had a wonderful summer, and have now come back, eager to fill your minds with knowledge?"

A few exaggerated, good-natured groans met his question, causing the tiny professor to smile wide beneath his tufts of white hair. Professor Flitwick brought a certain joy to his profession that was unmatched by any of his peers. It was a small wonder that he was almost universally praised by his students.

"To start off the term, we will begin by working on the freezing charm. Does anyone know the incantation? Yes, Miss Bones?"

"Congelo?" the auburn-haired girl answered hesitantly.

"Well done Miss Bones," Flitwick answered kindly, "earning your compatriots in Hufflepuff two points."

The professor went on to explain that proper wand movements and intricacies associated with the charm, before imploring them to pair up and practice the spell.

"Do you know how to do this?" Harry asked his two friends, prompting Millicent to shake her head.

"I got it to work once last year," Tracey admitted, "but it's been so long...too bad I can't practice," she ended bitterly, before withdrawing her wand, and jabbing it forward.

"Congelo!"

At her command, a faint blue spark emanated from her wand, but that was all.

"Fuck," she swore beneath her breath.

"That's going to be way better than my first try," Millicent replied, looking at her wand mistrustfully. She understood magic as well as anyone, but just didn't seem to pick up spells as quickly as Tracey.

"A promising start, Miss Davis," Professor Flitwick encouraged, before turning to Harry. "As for you, Mister Potter, I want you to work with Mister Macmillan today."

"Okay sir," Harry answered, following the professor over to the student in question. Harry had never really exchanged words with the blonde Hufflepuff boy, but Ernie didn't really look happy to be partnered with him.

"Um, do you want to try first?" Harry asked awkwardly.

"No," he answered coldly, crossing his arms.

"Okay then," Harry answered, slightly apprehensive. Sighing, he performed the freezing charm, solidifying the water within the goblet in front of them. Not exactly surprising, since Nicolas had taught it to him over the summer.

"Excellent, Mister Potter," Flitwick beamed, "you've just earned Slytherin five points."

Turning, Flitwick went to observe the other students progress, leaving behind only the glaring Hufflepuff.

"What's your problem?" Harry asked, losing patience.

"I don't want to be partnered with a killer," Ernie replied snobbishly, nose in the air.

"I guess it didn't take long for the Hat to cross Ravenclaw off the list, did it?" Harry mocked.

Ernie began to bluster, but Harry cut him off.

"Do you know how to think, Macmillan? Do you think Dumbledore would have let me come back if I killed anyone?"

"Then what about the Prophet?" he asked defiantly.

"Fuck the Prophet," Harry spat, causing Ernie to take a slight step back. "They also said I was going to take Voldemort's place, and that hasn't exactly happened yet."

Ernie, flinching slightly, looked like he was about to reply, but Zacharias got there first.

"Why don't you go work with Justin?" Smith suggested, pointing towards the other end of the room.

"Uh, yeah, sure," Ernie agreed, giving Harry one final fearful look before making his way across the room.

"You should probably ease off," Zacharias suggested.

"I'm sick of being called a murderer," Harry replied with a scowl, crossing his arms. "Where is all this coming from, anyway?"

Zacharias shook his head.

"Potter, I know you grew up in the muggle world, but you're a wizard. When are you going to start learning about our world?"

"I'm doing pretty good here," Harry said, but Zacharias shook his head.

"That's not the point. Hogwarts is only a small part of our world. Do you know anything about Britain's wizarding families?"

"Not really."

Zacharias sighed.

"The Macmillans are a Light, pureblooded family, just like the Weasleys. They don't trust you at all, and think you had something to do with...well, Percy's death," he finished awkwardly, clearly uncomfortable with the subject. "Ron has taken it really hard, and has been telling everyone he can that you're guilty."

"And they just believe him?" Harry asked incredulously.

"Of course it's stupid," Zacharias agreed, "but the Prophet is saying it too, and a lot of people still trust them."

"Well, thanks for letting me know."

While Harry was grateful for Smith's explanation, more than anything he was dejected, unable to think of how he could ever hope to fix things.

How do you convince someone you're not a murderer when you can't tell the truth?

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

"Harry, is that the Quibbler?" Millicent asked, her expression incredulous.

"Yeah, it is," he admitted, placing the publication within his bag, hoping that no one else would make a big deal over it.

"Um, why? Everyone knows most of the stuff in there is nonsense."

"Well, some of it is," Harry conceded, "but it's the only paper in Britain that doesn't work with the Ministry at all. I mean, sure, it has a lot of strange articles, but nothing in it is as stupid as the stuff in the Prophet."

"Yeah, true," she replied, nodding her head slightly reluctantly.

"You can read it after I'm done if you want," he offered, a teasing grin upon his face.

"No way," Millicent claimed, shaking her head back and forth, "but you have fun with your strange paper."

"I will," Harry assured, fighting the urge to take out the Quibbler and check out the housing advertisements. There would be plenty of time for that later, behind the fastenings of his bed.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

A voice called out to him, trying to pull him from his dream. In it, he had been flying at night, high above the city in a flying motorcycle.

"Harry, wake up."

Groaning, a five year-old Harry burrowed deeper into the covers, hoping the voice would go away. Why couldn't they just let him sleep?

"Wake up Harry," the female voice urged again, shaking his shoulder slightly.

"I wanna sleep," he complained from beneath the covers.

"Maybe tomorrow," she said, "but today we have a lot of stuff to do."

"Fine," Harry grumbled, throwing off the covers. Looking to his right, he saw through the window that it was still night. When he had gone to sleep, it had also been night. They had kept him up late last night, playing games, even though he had wanted to go to sleep.

"It's still dark," he whined to Callie.

"I know," she replied apologetically, "but there's a lot we have to do today, so we have to start early."

Yawning loudly, Harry crawled out of bed. When were they ever going to let him sleep?

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Within the Potions classroom, the split between the Gryffindors and the Slytherins was like a line in the sand, separating two warring factions. Splintered away from main Gryffindor force Hermione and Neville sat, seemingly ostracized by the rest of their House.

In Harry's opinion, it appeared that the cold stare of Professor Snape was the only factor that kept the animosity from spilling over the line. Despite the insults and threats that had been exchanged between the two Houses during the first week of class, a healthy fear of the Potions Master had kept the hostilities to mere looks of dislike.

Much like Flitwick had, Snape began the class by taking roll call. Passing over Harry's name, Snape practically spat it out, but had no further comment on the matter. Since last year, even when the Potions professor had handed him his second-year schedule, they had not exchanged any words. Did Snape blame him for being possessed by Voldemort?

"During our first class," Snape began, as roll call finished, "I explained that you are here to learn the subtle science and exact art of potion-making. If the first year's exam grades are any indication, very few of you have any grasp of subtlety or exact art."

Smirking slightly, the professor surveyed the Gryffindors, who appeared to be the target of his ire.

"The syllabus for first-year Potions is little more than the following of simple instructions. Unfortunately, it would appear that many of you lack the mental capacity to follow simple steps. The potions that we will be studying this year are more volatile than last year and are far more precise. The pathetic efforts I received last year will not suffice this year. After all," Snape began, letting out a shark-like leer, "it would be a tragedy if any foolish students hurt themselves due to their own incompetence."

The Gryffindors fumed beneath Snape's callous remarks, but wisely kept their mouths shut. In stark contrast to last year, Malfoy and his cronies weren't around to heckle the Gryffindors, so it was mere silence that met Snape's comments, as opposed to laughter.

Apparently finished mocking his students, Snape set them to brewing an Insomnia Draught, the very same one Harry had brewed halfway through the summer. Certainly not the most difficult Potion, but he had discovered it didn't turn out right if one over-stirred by even a quarter-revolution. Harry began to move his stuff over to Tracey and Millicent's table, but Snape's voice stopped him in his tracks.

"Today you will be working with Nott, Potter."

His black eyes seemed to be searching for challenge from Harry, but he offered none.

"Good luck," he wished to Millicent and Tracey, before moving his stuff over Nott's desk.

"I guess we're partners today," Harry said to the thin, reedy bespectacled boy.

"It would seem so," Theodore replied, before taking out his cauldron and setting fire a beneath it without any further comment.

Slightly mystified, Harry began to measure ingredients. Nott very rarely had anything to say, mostly keeping to himself during their first year. Apparently quite intelligent, the only person he ever seemed to have any reaction towards had been Malfoy, and even then it had been very passive dislike. Even more strange was that Theodore could apparently see thestrals. Harry wanted to ask how long he had been able to see them, but thought perhaps it was too personal of a question.

For the most part, the two Slytherins worked in silence. Fortunately, it appeared that Theodore was more than competent with brewing, sparing Harry the burden of having to carefully watch his every movement.

Why had Snape partnered them together? Last year, the professor hadn't a problem with Nott working by himself. With four less Slytherins this year, was Snape trying to build a sense of camaraderie between the remaining Slytherins?

"Does it bother you that Professor Snape is forcing you to work with others?" Harry asked out of nowhere.

"Not really," Theodore replied expressionlessly, "I understand why he's doing it."

"Yeah, House unity and such."

Theodore shook his head.

"That might be a part of it, but it's not the point. You've seen how closely Snape's been paying attention to us this class, correct?"

While normally the Potions Master occasionally graded papers throughout class, today he had not stopped his patrol of the classroom, paying the closest attention to the Gryffindors.

"Yeah, I have," Harry said with a nod. "Can't you just feel the goodwill coming from the Gryffindor side of the classroom?"

"Snape knows that the tension between the two Houses is going to ignite, he just doesn't want it to happen during his class, and it's easier to watch three cauldrons than four."

"That makes a lot of sense," he agreed.

Harry looked down to begin working again, but a loud boom quickly drew his attention. Darting his head to the right, he saw that acrid smoke was pouring from Ron and Dean's cauldron. What the hell had they been doing?

"Weasley, did you bother to read the instructions?" Snape snarled as the class turned to watch the spectacle. "If you had-"

Abruptly cutting off his diatribe, Snape withdrew his wand and brought it up. A lit rocket, frozen halfway in a trajectory towards Harry's cauldron, flew into Snape's hand. Livid, he extinguished the flames, rounding on Seamus and Lavender's desk.

"Tampering with other students' potions, are you Finnegan?"

Harry, who had missed the incoming projectile due to the explosion, turned on the sandy-haired Gryffindor.

"What the bloody hell is wrong with you?"

"I will handle this, Potter," Snape said curtly, cutting Harry off, who was still fuming. The Insomnia Draught was a fickle potion, but if the rocket had went off in the cauldron, it very well could have ignited it.

"No better than you deserve," Seamus mocked, not intimidated by Snape's death stare.

"Quiet, Finnegan," Snape snarled, before turning to the other Slytherins. "Class dismissed, take your cauldrons and get out of here."

Harry, still raging, threw his stuff together and stormed out the doorway. What the fuck was wrong with the Gryffindors this year?

"Wait up!" Millicent implored as she exited the classroom. Willing himself to calm down, Harry turned and waited for his classmate, who was quickly followed by Tracey.

"Did Finnegan lose his marbles?" Millicent asked, still uncomprehending that that boy would dare to challenge Snape.

"It's not just Finnegan, they were all in on it," Harry said, shaking his head.

"Yeah, the explosion must have just been a distraction," Tracey agreed.

"I don't think I've ever seen Snape so angry," Millicent observed. "Finnegan might have been off his rocker today, but whatever detention Snape comes up with...you know, I don't think he'll ever do anything that stupid again in class."

"Maybe," Harry replied with a shrug, "but then again, he is a Gryffindor."

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

All things considered, Harry was quite glad that the first scholastic week had drawn to a close. Between the whispered rumors and half-truths he heard during every walk between classes, not to mention that half of the Gryffindors seemed to have gone insane, the weekend gleamed even brighter than normal.

"This is great," Harry said, walking towards the library with his two close friends within Slytherin, "a night without any Gryffindors."

"Oh, did Hermione and Neville get re-sorted?" Tracey asked sarcastically.

"Fine, without any Gryffindors we don't want to see," Harry clarified, sending a mock glare in Tracey's direction.

"Well, who knows?" Millicent said with a shrug. "Maybe tonight Weasley and Finnegan decided to read up on thirteenth century history?"

"And perhaps tonight they're going to make me Minister," Harry said with a chuckle.

"Do you really want to jinx tonight?" Millicent pointed out. "With your ability to find trouble, I wouldn't be surprised if we..."

She trailed off as they turned the corner. At the sight in front of her, she shook her head, giving Harry an incredulous glance.

Up ahead of the trio, perhaps thirty feet down the hall; three first-year girls had their back to Harry, cornering another, small first-year girl. Luna.

Though her back was to the wall, there was no fear within the blonde Ravenclaw's eyes, only a faint disinterest. Unblinkingly she stared at the three girls surrounding her.

"I thought we were friends, Luna," the girl in the center, a redhead, demanded. "Why are you defending that murderer?"

"Because I do not think he is a murderer," Luna answered simply, as if it were obvious.

"You heard what Ginny's brother said," a dark haired girl accused, stomping her foot to emphasize the point. "Even the Prophet says it's true."

"I believe that Ron may have an infestation of wrackspurts in his mind, then," Luna explained, "if he believes the Prophet."

"What? Are you calling my brother a liar?" Ginny demanded, moving a step closer to the blonde girl.

Sighing, Harry stepped out of the shadows. Maybe Millicent was right; perhaps he should stop jinxing them.

"Is there a problem here?"

The three girls jumped with surprise. Turning around, Ginny let out a squeak at seeing him, and fled down the hall, closely followed by her two classmates.

"They seem to find you terrifying, but I don't know why," Luna said, confusion in her voice.

"Why were they bothering you?" Millicent asked kindly.

"During Charms class, Ginny was telling everyone what a monster you were, which I found odd since monsters typically aren't nice to people they don't even know. She didn't seem to like me pointing this out."

While Harry was humbled that someone went out of their way to defend him, it was his fight, and he certainly didn't want other people dragged into it.

"Thanks for defending me, Luna, but you may want to keep your opinions to yourself, or at least when you're not around other Ravenclaws."

"Why is that?" she asked with wide-eyed innocence.

"Well, the Gryffindors seem a little...off this year," Harry explained, "but they'd probably leave you alone when you're around your friends in your House."

"Oh, that," Luna replied, comprehension dawning on her face, "the other Ravenclaws don't seem to care much for me, but thanks for the concern. I really must be getting back to my dormitory."

Whistling, the strange girl took off, skipping as opposed to walking.

"She's...rather odd," Millicent observed.

"Just a bit," he said with a forced smile. Internally, he felt for the young girl. If things had gotten to the point of being cornered a mere week into the term...what would be happening in a month? Two?

No, if Luna was going out of her way to defend him, he had to do something to help her. Thankfully, he knew exactly what he needed to do.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

At breakfast the next morning, Harry was certainly not surprised at the amount of glares he received from the scattered Gryffindors. It had almost become part of his morning routine: wake up, use bathroom, get dressed, go to breakfast, and get glared at by Gryffindor.

"You know, I think I'm becoming immune to their glares," Harry said, motioning towards the Gryffindor table.

"Eh, when you see something every day, it stops being scary," Millicent said with a shrug. "They're going to have to try harder."

"I'm kinda hoping they don't," Harry admitted. "Before we know it, they'll be shooting fire out of their eyes."

"Look out," Millicent said, her eyes widening. Spinning around in his seat, he saw Ron approach the Slytherin table, his expression apoplectic. His ears were a bright red, which also seemed like an ill omen.

"You," Ron said, pointing at Harry, his finger shaking slightly, "we need to talk."

"Um, okay," Harry said cautiously, starting to get up.

"No, we can talk right here," Ron said with a sneer, "so everyone can hear us."

Resigning himself to the fact that the Gryffindor wanted to make a spectacle of their encounter, Harry sighed, getting to his feet. If Ron was going to yell at him, he wasn't going to take it sitting down.

"What's on your mind?"

Without warning, Ron jabbed a finger into Harry's chest, surprising him and pushing him back slightly. He almost toppled over the bench, but Tracey braced him, preventing him from falling.

"It's not enough that you kill my brother, but you have to terrorize my sister?"

The overwhelming urge to curse Weasley struck Harry, but he swallowed the impulse, realizing that Ron still hadn't gotten over Percy's death, and was merely lashing out.

"I don't know where you're getting this from, but I had nothing to do with his death."

Ron, his face and ears beet-red, stepped forward, bringing them face-to-face.

"If you ever bother my sister again, I'm going to make you sorry."

"If she wasn't ganging up on kids, she wouldn't have a problem," Harry snapped back, tiring of Ron's posturing.

At his comment, the redheaded boy glared at him. Harry was slightly shocked that he could practically feel the waves of pure hatred radiating off Ron. It was almost as if...he really did want to kill him.

"Mister Weasley, return to your table at once," Professor McGonagall ordered, making her way over to the Slytherin table. Ron ground his teeth for a moment, before turning and following her orders. She watched his progress, before favoring Harry with a curt nod.

"You should return to your breakfast as well," she ordered.

"Professor, he's going to hurt someone if he doesn't get help," Harry said.

"Thank you for your concern, Mister Potter, but Mister Weasley is going through a very difficult time right now," she explained, before making her way back to the Gryffindor table, presumably to talk to Ron.

For the first time, Harry was truly unnerved by the second-year Gryffindor. He knew Ron was angry, and coping with Percy's death badly...but how long would it take until Ron actually dealt with it?

He certainly hoped it was soon. If it wasn't, at the rate things were going, the entire school would be rallied against him by month's end.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Author Notes:

Well, back to Hogwarts again. So far it looks like year two will be more like canon than year one was, but I guess we'll all see as it develops.

After some reader feedback, I decided to scale back the scope of the flashbacks to Harry's childhood. They will still occur, but only the major ones will get more than a few paragraphs.

Any comments, suggestions or criticisms would be deeply appreciated. Even a quick "I liked it," or, "it sucked" will suffice. I'll make an effort to answer every review I get. Thanks to all that have reviewed, it has kept me writing as opposed to playing Bioshock 2, which I've already beaten on medium, and am now trying on hard, which I'm finding it providing more fun.

Thanks to my co-conspirator, mira mirth, for her valuable assistance with plotting, characterization and continuity. Also, Ellisande deserves credit for his assistance with continuity and making sure I followed canon rules.

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Nineteenth Movement: Inexorable Retribution

September 7, 1992

Beneath the bright sunlight pouring through the milky panes of glass that made up greenhouse three's ceiling, Harry Potter struggled to stuff a particularly vicious mandrake into a pot. With a grunt of effort, muffled by the fluffy pink earmuffs he wore, he placed both hands upon the mandrake's head and pushed down.

Unfortunately, at that very moment the mandrake chose to give up. Without resistance, Harry's hands squashed the young root against the bottom of the pot, crumpling the plant's stalk.

"Shit," Harry swore, quickly shoveling soil into the pot, throwing covert looks to either side of him. Luckily, it appeared Professor Sprout had not seen him nearly kill his mandrake, not to mention the other students were having their own troubles as well. He tried to smooth out the crumpled leaves, having a small measure of success, but it still did look rather ragged, like it had been trampled upon.

His part complete, he began gazing around the greenhouse. Himself, Millicent and Nott appeared to have been the only ones who had finished so far. Surprisingly, it appeared that most of the Ravenclaws were having their share of trouble with the mandrakes. With a slight grin, he saw Padma struggling with a mandrake, her deep, brown eyes narrowed with dislike. No, certainly not something they could learn by reading.

Harry hadn't had a lot of interaction with the Ravenclaws outside of Herbology this year, but they didn't seem to share the same vitriol as the Gryffindors, nor the dislike displayed by some of the Hufflepuffs.

Maybe he would be able to talk to her today after all.

Five minutes later, Professor Sprout caught their attention, signaling the end of class. With great relief he pulled off pink earmuffs and dropped them on the bench.

"You know, I think pink really works for you," Tracey said with a laugh, dropping her own blue earmuffs, beginning to brush the dark dirt from her light hair.

"You think?" Harry scoffed, wiping his hands on the front of his robes, but most of the dirt still clung to his fingers. He definitely needed to wash up before his next class.

"They really are ugly little buggers, aren't they?" Millicent mused, gazing back at the mandrake she had potted.

"Definitely," Harry agreed, glancing over at the converged Ravenclaw girls. The sight of them convened was slightly intimidating, but he didn't want to put this off any longer.

"I'll catch up you guys later," he said, before heading over to the Ravensclaws, who were preparing to depart greenhouse three. Though Padma had her head turned, the two girls that saw him coming, Su Li and Mandy Brocklehurst, didn't seem to fear his arrival, a promising sign.

"Hey Harry," Mandy greeted, "those pink earmuffs looked great on you."

"Weren't they just fabulous?" he quickly replied, drawing a chuckle from the two girls, as well as Padma, who had just turned around.

"They were-"

"What do you want?" another girl said with a sneer, cutting off her. Warily, Harry turned his attention to the dark brunette, one of the few Ravensclaws that hadn't been in Quirrell's class last year. Wasn't her name Moog or something?

"Stop it Morag," Padma snapped. Sulking, Morag grabbed her stuff and wordlessly stormed back towards the castle.

"Sorry about that," she apologized.

"It's okay," Harry replied, "she's not the only one with a problem with me."

Padma nodded at his statement.

"Yeah, I've noticed. It's almost like half the school has gone insane. Don't pay attention to Morag, most of the Ravensclaws ignore the Prophet."

Behind Padma, he saw Lisa Turpin's eyes narrow slightly, suggesting she wasn't too fond of Padma's claim, but at least most of the girls seemed okay.

"Oh, well that's good," Harry observed. "Um, do you have a minute...I, uh, want to ask you something."

Mandy began to giggle at his slight loss in composure, but Padma managed to keep a straight face.

"Sure," she answered, surprising Harry, before turning to her friends.

"Go on ahead, I'll catch up with you."

Lisa looked hesitant to leave, but Mandy and Su persuaded her to do so, leaving the two of them alone in greenhouse three.

"I...I need a favor," he said, unsure if he was doing the right thing.

"What?" she asked warily, doubt creeping into her voice.

"Well, do you know Luna Lovegood? She's in your House, but a year below us."

"Yeah," Padma answered. "She seems nice enough I guess, but a little...strange."

"She is a bit odd," he admitted, "but she could really use some friends in Ravenclaw?"

"Oh?" she remarked lightly, starting to comprehend what Harry was asking her.

"Last week, I found some Gryffindors cornering her, all for defending me. I made them go away and told her to stay with her friends, but she said the other Ravenclaws didn't really seem to like her."

"How do you know her?"

Harry grinned at her question.

"On the Hogwarts Express, we ran into each other. She said some...really odd things, but they were pretty funny."

"Well, I'll definitely talk to her," Padma promised, "and try to include her in some stuff."

Harry smiled at her assurance; certain he had made the right decision.

"Thanks."

She nodded at his gratitude, before biting her lip slightly, as if considering something.

"What's wrong?"

"Luna's not the only who's had problems when defending you against the Gryffindors."

"Really?" he asked, surprised. He figured Ginny and the other two girls had went after Luna because she didn't have any friends to defend her. What else was there?

"Parvati says that you're evil, and got mad when I tried to tell her she was wrong. She hasn't talked to me since last week."

As twins, Harry imagined that they were probably closer than most siblings were, so feuding with her sister was a big decision to make.

"Thanks for the support."

"You're welcome, but it's hard to take her seriously when she's says that you're the next Dark Lord, and ...Percy was just the beginning."

Harry snorted at her claim, ignoring the second part. It still hurt slightly to think about Percy.

"I know, I know," she rapidly reassured, "it's also the stupidest thing I've ever heard."

"Yeah, I know," he replied with a chuckle.

"I mean, my sister isn't the smartest person in the world, but she almost believed what she was saying....it almost scared me, Harry."

"Does she read the Prophet?" he asked, the wheels in his head beginning to turn.

"Never," Padma replied, shaking her head, before looking at her watch, and letting out a small squeak.

"I really need to wash up before class," she said, adjusting the book-bag slung over her shoulder.

"Yeah, so do I," Harry replied, following her out the door, into the bright sunshine. For a few moments, they walked in silence, the castle growing larger as they approached it.

"Thanks for helping Luna," he said as they entered the castle, about to go their separate ways.

"It's not a problem," she replied, waving her hand dismissively. "Just...be careful," she warned, before heading up the stairs.

Promising that he would, Harry turned towards the dungeon entrance, thinking he still had time to go back to his dormitory and wash up. He barely paid any attention to his path, his mind beginning to piece things together.

Ron. Seamus. Ginny. Parvati.

Their dislike and healthy fear of him certainly wasn't coming from the Prophet. Someone, most likely in Gryffindor, had the House absolutely convinced that he was evil.

But who?

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

In the muted light of an overcast day, Harry soared through the afternoon air, weaving around a bludger. Leaning to the left, his broom changed course, cutting away from a bright green slug-vomiting hex. Eyes widening, he pushed down hard on his broom, diving beneath a stinging hex.

Indeed, Marcus Flint was back at Hogwarts.

"Nice fuckin' work Potter," the unofficial captain roared with approval, before training his wand upon the next unfortunate victim. Letting out a bellowing laugh, Flint fired off a sickly yellow curse at Yaxley. The reserve Chaser barely avoided the curse, prompting Flint to pocket his wand and launch a bludger at the harried third-year.

Tearing his eyes away from the harried third-year, Harry resumed his search for the Snitch, keeping one eye upon the ground. Though no longer bearing the official title, Flint was clearly still running the show, and their first practice had once again taken on the terrifying shape that only Flint could forge. Their unofficial captain was convinced that the Gryffindors would be attempting to curse the Slytherins during the match, and wanted all of the players capable of avoiding spells in mid-air.

All things considered, it was a miracle that no one had been killed today.

After a few more terrifying minutes of avoiding curses and bludgers, Flint called the team to the center of the pitch. Letting out a collective sigh of relief, the team, Harry included, gathered around the unofficial captain.

"That's the fuckin' effort I want to see!" Flint yelled appreciatively, his booming voice echoing out across the pitch. "Practice like this everyday, and those fuckin' pussies in Gryffindor won't know what hit 'em. Fuckin' lions, more like fuckin' cubs."

Before he could build up a real head of steam, Derrick interjected.

"We've got to show those Gryffindors we're not going to be fucked with anymore."

"Fuckin' A," Flint agreed, punching Derrick in the shoulder. "Home of the fuckin' brave? Give me a fuckin' break. Those fucking 'high-and-mighty' Gryffindor cunts do nothin' but curse people in the back."

As Harry had recently begun to discover, the vendetta wasn't purely directed against him, but at the entirety of Slytherin. Small-scale skirmishes between the two Houses were becoming an increasingly common affair.

"In two months," Flint continued, his voice dropping an octave, "we're goin' to be battlin' those same cunts right here, and the whole school's goin' to be watchin'. This is goin' to be your one chance to show the rest of this soddin' school what you're made of. How 'bout it?"

The rest of the team, Harry included, let out a roar at Flint's words. Though inarticulate, Harry knew exactly what he spoke of. The first Quidditch game of the year had almost become more than a game, a show of superiority between the two Houses. For all their bravado and claims against the Slytherins of being Dark wizards, as of late most of the actual fighting had been instigated by the Gryffindors.

"Fuckin' right we will!" Flint roared, apparently satisfied by his team's efforts, before heading off the pitch. Talking excitedly amongst themselves, the rest of the team made their way back to the locker room.

For all of the attention the upcoming game was bringing, Harry found himself slightly nervous. With the rising hostility between the two Houses, the situation was bound to ignite, probably sooner than later.

How it would happen, he hadn't the faintest idea. With his luck, however...

He was probably going to be at its center.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

"What do you think?" Harry asked, glancing away from the rolling blue liquid within his cauldron to his new Potions partner, who shrugged at his query.

"You're the Potions expert, it'd be stupid of me to question you," Nott replied.

"I suppose so," Harry said with a sigh, beginning to run low on ways to engage the reedy boy in conversation. Carefully, he ladled the deep blue hair-dissolving Potion into two flasks, each with their respective names upon it. Without comment Nott corked the flasks

and scooped them up, bringing them up the center aisle to Snape's desk.

Halfway up the aisle, clutching the flasks to his chest, Nott stumbled forward. His hands occupied, the boy fell forward. He landed directly atop his hands, breaking the flasks with a dull, anticlimactic crack. His eyes widening, Harry caught sight of a sneaker pulled quickly back beneath the desk.

"Sorry," Lavender said carelessly, clearly not caring. Had she done it on purpose?

"You did that on purpose!" Daphne snarled, storming away from her cauldron.

Lavender wrinkled her nose.

"You Slytherins are so paranoid about everything," she remarked, flipping her hair over her shoulder.

"That's enough," Snape declared, freezing both of the girls in their tracks. Moving to the center of the room, he started to help Nott to his feet, but the bespectacled boy had already done so. Amazingly, Nott didn't let out a single cry, and his face was oddly impassive as he began to nonchalantly pick out the pieces of glass embedded within his other, equally perforated hand. Casually, he dropped a long, bloodstained shard to the ground, before beginning on another.

Turning away, Snape regarded the rest of the class with his black eyes, causing most of them to drop their gaze.

"Miss Granger, you will escort my student to the Infirmary," he declared, surprising the muggleborn witch.

"Y-y-yes sir," Hermione replied, her eyes glued to Nott's dripping hands. She went to lead Nott to the Infirmary, but he had already started walking, leaving a visibly shaken Hermione to follow him out of the classroom. Harry found himself also slightly disturbed by Nott's reaction. How the hell could he not seem to care about the glass sticking out of his hands?

"Miss Brown," Snape said, towering over the blonde girl, "accidents cannot happen in Potions, so perhaps fifty points from Gryffindor will

persuade you to be a little more careful with the positioning of your feet."

Lavender fumed at his words, but wisely chose to keep her mouth closed. Without further comments, Snape whirled around and withdrew his wand, vanishing the glass, blood and spilled potion with a single wave of his wand.

"Get back to work," he commanded, resuming his rounds. Following his orders, Harry filled another flask and dropped it off on Snape's desk. Done with his work, he wandered over to Millicent and Tracey, who were just finishing up their potion.

"Can you fucking believe that cunt?" Tracey asked furiously, making no effort to lower her voice.

"No," Millicent answered, shaking his head. "Did you see his hands? She didn't even seem to care."

"I don't think it was an accident, either," Harry added, thinking of the foot that had darted back beneath the desk, almost stealthily.

"It definitely wasn't an accident," Daphne added, making her way over to their desk, closely followed by Blaise.

"This is getting bad," Millicent said with a frown. "Before, it was just Ron and his cronies that had it in for Harry. Now, it's like everyone in Gryffindor doesn't care who it is, they just want to hurt us."

"Maybe they wouldn't do stuff like this if the professors actually cracked down on them," Blaise scornfully added. "Even Snape didn't do anything."

"Come on, Snape's not an idiot," Tracey argued. "He knew that bitch did it on purpose, but he can't suspend someone, since she could just say it was an accident. I bet if she had said even a single word, Snape would have given her a month of detention for insubordination."

"Probably," Harry agreed. "Most likely, she only did it because she knew she could get away with it. I know it sucks, but Tracey's right, the worst Snape can do is take away points."

"I guess..." Daphne said with a sigh, before a devious grin broke out over her face.

"Pretend you're not watching me," she ordered, before taking off.

"Um, Blaise, did you see that look?" Millicent asked warily.

Blaise nodded at the question, a smug look upon his face.

"She's not going to do something stupid, is she?" Harry asked uncertainly.

"Well, not necessarily stupid, but I would not want to be Lavender Brown right now."

Looking over Tracey's shoulder, Harry saw Lavender approach Professor Snape's desk, placing two flasks on it. Before she could turn around, Daphne closes in, tripping over her feet, the flask in her hands flying out.

A flask without a cork in it.

Wincing slightly, but helpless to keep from smiling, Harry watched as the blue potion splattered all over Lavender's back, soaking her carefully maintained blonde hair. Like burning paper, the strands of hair began to curl upwards as they disintegrated, the potion doing its work.

Lavender turned slowly, her mouth and eyes frozen with shock, blue potion running down her robes and dripping upon the floor.

"Whoops!" Daphne exclaimed. "Sorry about that, Lavender."

Daphne's words shattered Lavender's paralysis, causing the blonde to storm forward. She launched herself at Daphne but smacked into an invisible wall, stunning her.

"That will be enough," Snape said sternly, wand drawn.

"You bitch!" Lavender screamed, running her hands through the crumbling remains of what was once her hair.

"I love the new look," Daphne mocked, smiling wide. At her words, Lavender buried her head in her hands and began to cry. Seeing a blur of motion in his right peripherals, Harry turned to see Parvati grab an empty flask from her desk and fling it at the smirking Slytherin girl. Without thinking, Harry drew his wand.

"Accio flask!"

With a loud crash, the flask shattered upon contact with Daphne's head, knocking her to the floor, his spell coming milliseconds too late.

"How do you like that, you slut!" Parvati yelled, before a cannonball blast exploded within the room, silencing them all. Shaking her head, Daphne unsteadily rose to her feet, a cut above her eye welling blood.

"Attacking other students, are you Miss Patil?" Snape asked dangerously, practically radiating anger.

Parvati chose to stare at the floor as opposed to answering.

"Blaise, please assist in helping Miss Greengrass to the infirmary," Snape ordered, before training his gaze back upon Parvati.

"Not so brave now that you're faced with someone looking you in the eyes, as opposed to having their back turned, are you?"

Most likely not expecting an answer, Snape addressed the class as a whole.

"This is a Potions classroom, not a place for you to settle your petty squabbles. If any of you continue to act in such a childish manner, you shall join Miss Patil in losing your weekends for the rest of the term. I will not tolerate such insolence any longer, and any further malcontents will receive my fiercest attempts to get them expelled. Now get out of my sight!"

The Gryffindors took his words to heart, evacuating the classroom before Harry could even gather up his book-bag, Parvati supporting the sniffing form of Lavender.

"Potter, Bulstrode, Davis, I want a word with you three."

The trio gazed uncertainly at one another, before placing their belonging back upon the desk. Again withdrawing his wand, he shot from it a silvery shape that swiftly disappeared into the wall. The spell cast, he trained his gaze upon the three tense students.

"Do you three see what's happening here?" Snape asked, folding his arms.

"Gryffindor's gone completely insane," Millicent said with complete conviction. Harry couldn't agree more; what kind of idiot started a fight during Potions?

"An oversimplification, but essentially correct," Snape replied. "The Gryffindors are often the easiest House to manipulate, being slaves to impulsive behavior and emotional immaturity."

"They really seem convinced that we're all evil Dark wizard, and I think it might be one person who's convincing them, who's starting it all," Harry stated, looking the Potions Master in the eye. "Are you saying it might be someone outside of Gryffindor?"

"I am saying nothing, Potter," Snape said sharply, "I only wish to you impart upon you that it may be anyone, and that you need to be on alert."

"You think that someone's just using the Gryffindors, don't you?" Tracey shrewdly asked.

"I believe it a strong possibility," Snape confirmed with a sharp nod, "but my primary concern is the safety of my students. As we have learned beyond any shadow of a doubt today that the Gryffindors are becoming increasingly indiscriminate regarding their choice of target."

Harry couldn't agree more. Attacking Nott...it just didn't make sense. He never interacted with anyone, so he would have never really had the opportunity to piss anyone off.

"Why aren't the professors doing more to stop this?" Harry asked. Surely they'd noticed something was seriously wrong with the school.

"That is none of your concern, Potter," Snape answered with a glare, "you three just need to worry about yourselves. Now get out of my sight, I've a class to prepare for."

Needing no further invitation, the three took their leave of the classroom, each lost within their own thoughts. Though the idea that it might be someone outside was intriguing, he was more perturbed with Snape's curt response to his last question.

Really, when were the professors going to wake the fuck up and realize the Slytherins almost literally had a target upon their backs?

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Later that Friday night, within the library, the three Slytherins relayed their conversation with Snape to both Hermione and Neville.

"I'm not really too surprised Snape doesn't have a high opinion of Gryffindor," Neville admitted, causing them to snort with laughter.

"Do you guys think it's possible, though?" Harry pressed. "I mean, you guys are in Gryffindor, you'd know better than anyone."

At his statement, Hermione and Neville exchanged looks.

"Harry, according to the rest of our House, the color of our badge is the only thing we share with Gryffindor," Hermione said, regret in her voice.

The tone immediately set Harry's teeth on edge. After all that Hermione had endured last year, the last thing he was going to allow was her to be hurt further. Reaching across the table, he grasped her hand reassuringly.

"How bad is it?"

"Nothing compared to what you have to deal with," she said with a small smile, "but still...it's unpleasant. We're completely ignored, treated like we don't exist. Literally."

"What do you mean?"

Sighing, Hermione continued.

"They're hiding things from the both of us. Sometimes, when we enter the Common Room, it goes completely quiet, and no one will start talking until we go up to our rooms. Sometimes the Fat Lady disappears for a long time, locking us out of Gryffindor Tower. It's even worse for Neville."

"Not much," he argued, "but...some nights I can't get into my room, and have to sleep on a couch in the Common Room."

"How do they keep you out?" Tracey asked. "You know the unlocking curse."

"Yeah, I do know it, but it doesn't work."

"What, do they brace the door?" Millicent asked, causing Neville to shrug.

"I don't know what they do, but whatever it is, it works. It's not really a bad thing, though...sometimes I feel safer on the couch."

"Do they ever say anything about you being my friend?" Harry asked, thinking of the flak that Luna, and to a lesser extent, Padma, received.

Neville shook his head.

"They don't really say anything to me, but...sometimes I look up, and people will look in the other direction, like they're trying to pretend they weren't watching me. In the second before they look away...there's a look in their eyes that really scares me."

"Have you tried talking to McGonagall about it?"

"Definitely not," Neville answered. "I almost think the only reason they haven't done anything to me is because I keep my mouth closed."

"Doesn't McGonagall realize that something's off though?" Tracey asked, shaking her head. "I mean, they were booing during the Sorting. Isn't that a pretty clear sign?"

"Snape's class excluded, they're not being stupid about this," Hermione clarified. "It's scary to think about...but their efforts almost seem coordinated."

"Coordinated?" Tracey repeated skeptically.

"I know it sounds crazy, but think of the stuff we've seen. We know that Gryffindors are picking fights with Slytherins, but never get in trouble for it. Take Lavender, for instance. She sees a chance to hurt a Slytherin without getting caught, she takes it without blinking."

"This sounds completely different from what I knew about her," Millicent offered.

"It is. Last year, she was slightly snobbish, gossipy, but not really mean-spirited. This year..." she trailed off, at a loss for words.

"She treated Nott like he was a worm," Harry said. "She didn't really even seem to care that he actually was really hurt."

"He didn't seem to care much either," Millicent added.

"No, but that's beside the point. It's like...maybe she thought he deserved it?" Harry guessed.

"Maybe," Hermione said slowly. "What if this hypothetical 'someone' Snape mentioned somehow convinced most of Gryffindor that Slytherins were nothing but evil, Dark wizards, who didn't deserve any of our mercy?"

"Are you saying that Gryffindor thinks they're fighting some sort of war against the Dark?" Millicent asked.

"Maybe," Harry said with a shrug, "but I'm not sure. Say this person exists. It'd have to be an older person, someone who could get people to listen to them, who could convince people. Someone younger kids looked up to. Any ideas?"

Harry looked around the table, but no one seemed to have any real ideas.

"I do think Snape's wrong, though," Tracey added. "To convince someone so thoroughly...it'd take a lot of time, effort and access. It's got to be someone within Gryffindor."

"Maybe," Harry conceded, "but we still don't have any idea who, and I've got a feeling if we don't figure it out soon, things are just going to keep getting worse here."

The group was silent for a moment, each absorbed within their own thoughts. Slowly, Harry's mind began to make connections. There had to be...

"Neville, do you know for sure who's in your room when you're locked out?"

"No, never," the pudgy boy admitted. "Do you think they're using my room as a meeting place?"

"No, but I think it definitely has something to do with what's going on. I'd hate to ask you, but..."

"I'll do it," Neville said without hesitation.

"Please, you need to think about what I'm asking you."

"No, I don't," he disagreed. "If I was in trouble, none of you would think twice about helping me out. Right now, the Gryffindors are out for you. What if it gets worse? What if the professors can't do anything about it? No, we have to stop this before it gets too far."

"Thanks Neville," Millicent said, sending a fond smile in his direction. Blushing slightly, he stared at the floor for a moment.

"You guys would do the same for me," he mumbled, before looking up. "Though since I don't know how to get through the door, I can't really do much."

At his statement, Harry let out a wide grin.

"Oh, I've got a few ideas..."

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

At dinner Wednesday night, Harry found himself keeping a closer eye on his watch than normal, a fact which did not escape Tracey's notice.

"Relax," Tracey urged, a mocking smile upon her face, "soon enough, you'll get to spend time with your hero."

Harry grimaced at her statement.

"I hate you so much."

Tracey's mouth twitched, clearly holding in laughter.

"Why? We're the ones who are jealous of you. I mean, a whole hour with Gilderoy Lockhart! Who wouldn't want that?"

Letting out a groan, Harry slumped forward over the table, pantomiming slamming his head upon it. While it had seemed like a good idea a week ago to use Lockhart to clear his name, now he was feeling less than confident about his chances.

"If it bothers you so much, just cancel it," Millicent said grumpily, crossing her arms.

Over the past week, the rose-colored glasses Millicent had viewed Lockhart with had begun to clear. Seeing his raging egoism for several hours a week had begun to sour her opinion of the media sensation.

"If there's any chance that he can get the Prophet to stop writing stuff about me, I have to try," Harry said wearily.

"Even if you guys don't like him, Lockhart is famous, and probably has a lot of friends over at the Prophet. Just bite your tongue and do it," Millicent finished forcefully.

"And don't forget to get an autograph for our good friend," Tracey added innocently. Her comment caused Millicent's expression to darken considerably, an ill omen.

"Tracey, if you don't shut up, I'm going to start writing love letters to Lockhart and sign them with your name."

"Fine, fine!" the diminutive blonde exclaimed, throwing her hands up in surrender. Chuckling to himself, Harry got up from the table.

"Look, I'm just going to show up early, see if I can get his over with. I'll catch up you two later, yeah?"

"Have fun," Tracey wished, giving him a jovial wave.

"Gee, thanks," Harry said sarcastically, making his way out of the Great Hall. Ascending the stone stairs slowly, he began to think about his decision.

Someone like Lockhart, who seemed to be completely self-obsessed, only did things for themselves. So when Lockhart offered to help him, he had to be getting something out of it. Harry imagined it would take a pretty big favor to get the Prophet to stop trashing him. Assuming that Lockhart did actually have friends at the Prophet, what did he need him for?

Approaching the entrance to the Defense classroom, Harry checked his watch again, to see that he more than twenty minutes early. Oh well.

Shrugging, he grasped the handle and turned. If Lockhart wasn't ready, he wasn't ready.

To his surprise, the door was locked. Perhaps he'd have to wait around after all. Resigning himself to waiting, he started to walk away from the door, before muffled voices met his ears. Most of it he couldn't make out, but one word was clear.

Potter.

Shaking his head, Harry stared at the door. Lockhart probably wasn't talking to himself, and if they had been on the other side of the door, he'd be able to hear them more clearly. No, Lockhart was definitely in his office. Who was he talking to, though, and why were they talking about him?

He froze as Snape's words occurred to him. Was...was it possible that Lockhart was behind everything? As stupid as it sounded, he couldn't shake the idea.

Throwing caution to the wind, he withdrew his wand and unlocked it with a whispered incantation. Pressing against the wooden door, he pushed it open a millimeter at a time. The sun's dying rays peeked into the classroom through the windows, but it was completely empty. Light shone out from beneath the door to Lockhart's office, clearly the source of the voices.

Taking a deep breath, he cast silencing charms upon his feet, and carefully made his way across the stone floor. Creeping up the small flight of stairs, he stealthily pressed his ear to the door.

"...just not a good idea," was the first thing Harry heard, in a voice that was clearly Lockhart's. "If this backfires, Potter's stink is going to be all over me. For that matter, why did you insist on meeting at this time? Potter could be here at any minute!"

"Relax," a second male voice replied, "you're getting a lot of free publicity out of this deal, mentoring a troubled child. From what I've been told, Potter is an extremely talented, intelligent child. If he goes on to do great things, you go down in history as the man who turned him away from the Dark path. Do not forget why we brought you here, Lockhart."

The second voice was vaguely familiar, tinged with an edge of superiority that set Harry's teeth on edge. Why did it seem so familiar?

"Please," Lockhart snorted, "as if I need this."

"You're not fooling anyone; I know that you desperately need the publicity that mentoring Britain's most famous child would bring."

"I did just have a book release party, which was filled with reporters. I'm not exactly starving for publicity."

"You're always starving for publicity," the second man smugly pointed out, "besides, they're just vultures circling for the kill, Lockhart. I've heard things about you that would give the press a collective orgasm. Not everyone has forgotten about Katelyn Wellington."

A heavy silence followed the statement. Who was Katelyn Wellington?

"H-how'd you know about that?" Lockhart chokes out.

"It is my business to know these things, but take solace in the fact that revealing that tidbit to the press wouldn't work to my advantage."

"If I find out you told anyone-"

"You will do nothing," the man stated coldly, cutting off Lockhart mid-sentence. "As I've already said, I know all about you. You could barely win a duel against a third-year."

Silence fell once again, and Harry could practically feel the heat of Lockhart fuming. He had suspected the new Defense instructor was a poor wizard...but not this bad.

"What if Potter goes on a killing spree?" Lockhart asked, breaking the silence. "That won't help me much."

The other voice let out a burst of cold laughter.

"Please, anyone with half a brain realizes that Potter didn't kill the Weasley kid, it's just Fudge's propaganda machine running at full tilt."

"Yeah, but what about wizarding Britain?" Lockhart asked smugly.

The other voice laughed again.

"If you do your part, Fudge is going to drop his smear campaign, and after the first Prophet puff piece on Potter, the public is going to swiftly forget all those nasty rumors. Besides, if he does go Dark, you'll be remembered as the man who attempted to bring him back into the Light."

"Fine," Lockhart agreed, "just don't forget your end of the bargain."

Following Lockhart's agreement, Harry head the fireplace within come to life.

"Ministry of Magic," the second voice said clearly. "As long as you remember yours," the voice warned, before a whoosh of flames signaled his departure.

Scrambling backwards, Harry carefully made his way away from the classroom, re-locking the door on his way out. He took off down the hall and rounded the corner, sitting down on a bench, trying to clear his head.

So apparently Lockhart did need him a lot. Considering what an asshole he was, it wasn't all that surprising that his career was in jeopardy. Harry supposed he should have felt betrayed by Lockhart, but he really wasn't. All along he had suspected Lockhart was planning to use him, just as Harry planned on using Lockhart to clear his name to the wizarding public. Did he still want to do that anymore, though?

The appearance of the second person bothered him a lot. Was it a Ministry employee or something? Well, whoever they were, they also seemed to have an agenda regarding him, and were merely using Lockhart as a tool to accomplish it. However, they did talk about Fudge dropping his campaign, which was intriguing. Were there people out there who were actually looking out for him? And who was Katelyn Wellington?

Rather than being discouraged by the fruits of his eavesdropping, he was encouraged. It appeared that the person Lockhart was talking to, whoever they were, did have a link to the Ministry, and actually was capable of stopping the Prophet. Maybe he had a way out of this, after all.

With five minutes to go until their meeting, Harry made his way over to the classroom, knocking loudly upon the door. At the very least, he could hear Lockhart out.

The door opened swiftly, revealing a smiling Lockhart, adorned in mauve robes.

"I'm sorry I came early."

Lockhart waved a hand, topped by carefully manicured nails, dismissively.

"Punctuality is an important trait, no need to apologize. Please, come in."

Lockhart opened the door wider, and led him into his office, the sight of which stopped Harry in his tracks.

The office was a shrine to narcissism. Countless pictures of Lockhart's smiling, winking face covered the walls. A large, oak bookshelf with multiple copies of all of his published works leaned up against the right-hand wall.

"Please, have a seat," Lockhart urged, before taking a seat behind the large, ornate desk.

"Thanks," Harry mechanically replied, struggling to hold down the bile in his throat. How much did this guy love himself?

After exchanging general pleasantries, during which Harry gave short, clipped answers, Lockhart placed his elbows upon the desk, leaning forward.

"Harry, it pains me to say as much, but the wizarding public does not have a kind opinion of you."

"I noticed," Harry said dryly, "but it's all lies."

"Most of what we hear every day is lies," Lockhart counters, "and while the Prophet's words against you may be untrue, a lot of people do believe them, and perception is reality, Harry. Sadly, the truth is usually of little importance; all that matters is what you can sell."

Could this guy get any more repulsive? Playing along, he resisted the urge to walk out.

"How can I change things, though?"

"Well, swaying the court of public opinion is a slow process, but often being seen doing good things is a start. This weekend, why don't I teach you about Quidditch? I'll talk to a few publicists; make sure a few reporters are there, and presto! We've got a nice piece for the Prophet. Perhaps we'll even make the front page!"

Oh, yeah, fucking great. Lockhart as a caring figure. Did he really want to go through with this? Gritting his teeth, Harry realized that it was something he had to do. If he could escape the public's scorn, perhaps it would be enough to cause the tide of vitriol against him to recede.

"Sounds good to me," Harry replied jovially, praying he wasn't making a mistake.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

The skies above Harry were overcast as he trudged towards the Quidditch pitch Saturday afternoon, broom slung over his shoulder, the smell of rain in the air. He hoped that it wasn't an omen that this day would turn out disastrous, but the nagging doubt that had snared his mind all week said otherwise.

Lockhart was exactly where he said he'd be, waiting for him outside the pitch. As was typical with the Defense instructor, he looked at though he had just stepped off a photo shoot, with his immaculately cut lavender robes and a smile so white it looked almost unnatural.

Noticing that Lockhart had not yet seen him, Harry pondered creeping back to Hogwarts and playing sick. Right before he went to turn around, Lockhart gave a large, jovial wave in his direction, beckoning him over.

Fucking hell.

Hoping it would be worth it, Harry plastered a fake smile upon his face.

"Good afternoon, professor."

"Good to see you, Harry! I was afraid you weren't going to make it."

"How could I miss this?" Harry asked, probably the most bald-faced lie he had ever told.

"That's the spirit! No time to waste now, let's go."

Lockhart abruptly took off at a quick pace, one that forced Harry to walk much faster.

"I've already taken the liberty of assuring the appearance of several reporters," Lockhart explained as they passed beyond the front gates of Hogwarts, "all you'll need to do is follow my lead and you'll be fine."

"Uh, well, what are we doing?" Harry asked, giving his Nimbus Two Thousand a quick glance.

"During my time at Hogwarts, I was quite the Quidditch player myself," Lockhart boasted, "much like you are on your way to becoming. I can give you a few pointers on the game, and besides, a casual photograph of you with your broom slung over your shoulder would look wonderful in tomorrow's Prophet."

"I guess," Harry replied quietly as they passed into Hogsmeade Village. Squashed, small homes with thatched roofs lined both sides of the street, making him feel as if he been transported to another time period.

Establishments that were pure myth to second-years such as himself, but spoken of fondly by the older students met his eyes, such as Zonko's and Honeydukes. He even saw the much maligned Madam Puddifoot's. He wanted to stop and at least look through the windows, but Lockhart didn't even slow as he took a left at the center of the village, bringing them to a park. Just before the iron gates, Lockhart stopped him.

"Above all things, Harry," Lockhart instructed, "don't look at the camera. For photo opportunities such as this, the public is more moved by our nonchalant moments, as it's the closest glimpse they'll ever get into our private lives."

The Defense instructor winked at him a final time, slapping the side of his shoulder in what Harry assumed was supposed to be a gesture of reassurance.

"Natural, Harry, natural," he reiterated, before striding into the park, head held high. Sighing internally, Harry followed, trying not to see the group of reporters standing at the other end of the park, cameras at the ready.

"Mister Potter!" one of the reporters yelled, a thin, balding man with a drooping mustache. "How do you feel about Percy Weasley's death?"

Another one, an immensely fat man, yelled even louder, as camera flashed behind him.

"Is it true you're a practitioner of the Dark Arts?"

"Just ignore them Harry," Lockhart urged out of the corner of his mouth, without turning around. "We'll answer a few questions at the end."

At the center of the park, Harry pulled down his broom and took to the air, hovering several feet above Lockhart.

"Now, I know you're new to flying," Lockhart began, "but we'll have you flying like a professional in no time!"

Fucking great.

"When you're flying, you want to keep your weight at the center of the broom. Try that, see how it feels."

Sighing, Harry did as suggested, thinking that perhaps this was going to be a very long day.

"Now, if you want to go forward, just lean forward a little," Lockhart offered.

"Wow, thanks for the great advice!" Harry exclaimed sarcastically, flying forward a few feet. If Madam Hooch didn't watch herself, this guy was going to take her job.

After a few minutes more of inane instruction, which had Harry beginning to wonder if Lockhart even knew how to fly, the Defense instructor withdrew a Quaffle from his robes.

"I know you're a Seeker, Harry," he began, "but it's still important to learn how to handle the Quaffle."

"Yeah, I already know how," Harry replied, thinking the game against Hufflepuff last year where he had played Chaser.

"Catch it with your hands, and then bring it into your body," Lockhart instructed as he tossed the Quaffle overhanded, completely ignoring him. Harry caught it easily and threw it back.

"How much longer do we have to do this?"

"Only for another half-hour," Lockhart replied, tossing the Quaffle back at him. It was with great effort that Harry restrained himself from trying to jam the orange sphere down his professor's throat.

Unsurprisingly, the thirty minutes seemed to stretched out for an eternity, with his already low opinion of the professor plummeting by the moment. After every catch, no matter how mundane it may have been, he received enthusiastic, overdramatic congratulations from Lockhart. As his initial embarrassment shifted into annoyance, he began to acknowledge that maybe it had been a mistake to agree to work with Lockhart.

Upon the half-hour's close, Lockhart motioned for Harry to land, where he began to ruffle Harry's hair in what he assumed was supposed to be a display of camaraderie.

No fucking way.

Harry immediately dropped to the ground, pretending to tie a shoelace. It seemed like a much better alternative than his first impulse to draw his wand and curse Lockhart's hand.

Looking up for a moment, Harry saw that Lockhart had not been put out in the slightest by his actions, and had merely shook his head whimsically.

"All the questions have been pre-arranged, so just leave everything to me," he explained, before turning to the waiting reporters. "We'll answer a few questions now."

Several reporters, quill in hand, made their way over. The thin, mustached one was the first to arrive, and thus got first crack.

"What's your impression of Harry Potter?"

Lockhart gave a small laugh at the question, before letting out one of his dazzling smiles.

"Harry is a very talented, intelligent child; he's just in need of a little guidance. He also has quite the knack for Quidditch, much like myself," Lockhart finished, giving one of his trademark winks.

"Do you think it's helpful to Harry to finally have a father figure in his life?" another reporter asked.

"What?" Harry exclaimed, staring at Lockhart incredulously. Though his response drew the keen interest of the reporters, he barely registered the fact. Who the fuck did Lockhart think he was?

Lockhart gave a small, fake laugh.

"Well, it's important for a young man to have direction, as it's all too easy to get lost with it," he stated, heedless to Harry's indignation.

Rage began to cloud his vision at Lockhart's antics. This was not what he fucking signed up for.

"I'm not feeling good," Harry loudly declared, trying to end the debacle in a somewhat graceful manner.

"Just a few more questions," Lockhart said distractedly, his attention focused upon the reporters.

Furious, but unwilling to completely alienate the reporters, he discreetly freed his wand from his pocket, and pointed it at himself.

"Evomitus."

Unseen to anyone else, the whispered green spell struck him in the chest, beneath his robes. Throwing his head forward, he ejected the contents of his breakfast all over the ground before him, getting some of it on Lockhart's immaculate robes.

Before the reporter's widened gazes, the smile upon Lockhart's face diminished slightly. It threatened to disappear entirely upon seeing the bounty of Harry's stomach splashed upon his robes, but by the thinnest of margins, he kept it up.

"I-I-I'm sorry Professor," Harry forced out, struggling not to burst out in laughter, despite the sour taste in his mouth.

Lockhart forced his smile a bit wider, allowing himself a single glance at the supporters. Acting nonchalant, as if he had not just been vomited upon, he addressed the reporters.

"I'm sorry, but young Harry appears to be feeling a little under the weather," Lockhart explained, "so that will be all for today."

"You promised us access to Potter, Lockhart," the thin reporter snarled, his eyes narrowed. Harry promptly let out another groan, as if threatening to puke again.

"I don't believe Harry is in any shape to answer any more questions," Lockhart replied, leading Harry away from the park. The reporters muttered among themselves, but didn't try to pursue the retreating duo.

On their way back, Lockhart's smile fell away, as if resting after lifting a heavy weight, to be replaced by a bitter, almost petulant expression. Oddly enough, he didn't bother to vanish the vomit from his robes, instead opting to wipe what he could away with a silk handkerchief.

The return-trip was silent, a condition which Harry relished. From the start, he had acknowledged that Lockhart had merely wanted to use him to further his own fame...but positioning himself as a father-figure to Harry? No, he wasn't okay with being exploited to that degree.

"Can you make it to the Infirmary on your own?" Lockhart asked as they approached the castle.

"Yeah, I'll be fine," Harry assured, thankful that it was almost over.

"Good, good," Lockhart replied, apparently relieved. "We had a little hiccup today, but this is just the beginning, Harry. We're going to do great things together."

"Yeah," Harry said lamely, quite certain that wouldn't be the case, and began to walk up the stairs slowly, as if still feeling the effects of his 'sickness'. Once certain he had left Lockhart behind, he began to

walk normal, eager to tell his friends how much of a fraud Lockhart really was. Judging by how disenchanted Millicent had started to become with the Defense instructor, the news probably wouldn't surprise her a great deal.

Taking the stairs up to the fourth floor, he walked down the corridor. Turning the corner, he found himself feet from the Hogwarts Caretaker, Filch. Though feared by the student populace in general, Harry just found Filch to be a grumpy man with the unenviable task of cleaning up after a school full of children.

Normally, that is.

Gazing upon Filch, he couldn't help but notice eyes so bloodshot they looked almost completely red, and the hollow look in them. He had appeared to have lost a great deal of weight, with the skin practically hanging off of his bones.

"Have you seen Mrs. Norris," he rasped, nearly causing Harry to jump. It was hoarse, almost a gasp of sorts, and only the second time the caretaker had addressed him.

"Uhh, no, I'm sorry," Harry replied, feeling distinctly sorry for the man. Was he that attached to the dust-colored cat? No, that couldn't be it. Thinking back to last semester, he thought of Filch's mysterious words of warning. Had he been talking about his own health?

"Um, Mister Filch," Harry began awkwardly, "what did you mean about 'bad things' last semester?"

"I said something about that?" the old man asked, his voice confused.

"Uh, yeah."

At his confirmation, Filch shuddered for a moment, as if he was almost about to cry.

"Ain't nothing making any sense no more," Filch said, misery in his voice. "Where did they all go?"

Without further comment, Filch walked off, shoulders slumped. Harry almost wanted to say something, but was completely bewildered by

the man's actions. Shouldn't he get help of some sort? Not only was he not making any sense, but there was something seriously physically wrong with him.

Deeply unnerved, he continued onto the library. Could this day get any stranger?

Upon entering the library, avoiding the sentinel-like gaze of Madam Pince, he made his way to the back, where their usual table was located. The first thing he noticed upon seeing their table was that Neville was missing, quickly followed by equal parts worry and anger written across all of their faces.

Oh shite.

"What's going on?" Harry asked.

"Those fucking twats got Neville," Tracey spat.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Following a long, sleepless night, Harry wolfed down a quick breakfast, making sure to arrive at the infirmary at eight o' clock, the earliest time the Hogwarts' matron would allow any visitors.

"Mister Longbottom has been through a traumatic experience," Madam Pomfrey explained sternly, "and at this point, he needs rest more than anything else. However, I will allow you four to visit him for a half-hour."

The quartet, three Slytherins and a Gryffindor, acknowledged her words with a nod.

"That being said," she continued, "you are not to excite Mister Longbottom in any fashion. Are we clear on this matter?"

"Yes," Harry quickly answered to the forceful question, followed by the other three students adding their assertion.

"Very well," she said with a sharp nod. "I will be in my office if you need anything. Remember, I will not hesitate to throw you all out if you excite Neville in any way."

Her warning delivered, she went back into her office and sat behind the desk, keeping the door open, most likely to keep tabs on their visit. Not a huge deal, Harry was used to dealing with a little supervision.

"Are you guys ready?" Harry asked, masking his own unease. Had Neville been caught trying to break into his dormitory room? Was it his plan that had caused the Gryffindors to strike down upon Neville?

"Yeah," Tracey said with a nervous nod, looking towards the far end of the infirmary, where white curtains hid their friend from sight. Hermione and Tracey merely nodded, which was enough for Harry. Taking a deep breath, he walked towards the shrouded area and pulled back the curtain.

Neville was sitting upright in bed, his eyes wide open, as if expecting their arrival. His right arm was in a sling, while a heavy bandage covered the top of his head.

"Hi guys," he croaked out between bruised and puffy lips. Harry winced at the sight of his friends, causing Neville's cracked lips to break out into a small smile.

"It's not as bad as it looks."

"It still looks pretty bad," Tracey pointed out, her expression pale, save for two bright spots of color high upon her cheeks.

"Yeah, I know," he admitted, "but the bones in my arm are almost completely re-grown and the bruises should be almost gone by tomorrow."

"I'm so sorry for getting you involved in this," Harry apologized, transfixed by the apparent severity of Neville's injuries. How close had they come to killing him?

"Thanks," Neville replied, shaking his head slightly, "but it was the right thing to do. If we don't figure out what's going on with the rest of the Gryffindors....things are going to get real bad here."

His words of assurance didn't really make Harry feel better, but he was grateful that Neville didn't blame him.

"Was it Ron?" Tracey nearly spat, her temper clearly on the rise.

"I...I have no idea who it was," Neville admitted with a sigh, looking defeated for a moment.

Hermione, who had not said a word, chose that moment to go to Neville's bedside, gingerly taking one of his hands within her own.

"What happened?" she softly asked.

"Yesterday morning, I purposely left my Charms book in my room. When I went back to it that afternoon, it was locked. I tried banging on it, yelling, but I didn't hear anything on the other side. I think you're right Harry, the probably were using a privacy charm. I tried the unlocking charm, but even though the handle turned, the door didn't move."

Harry groaned internally, knowing what was coming next. He should, considering he told Neville how to do it.

"I hit the door with a redcuter, blowing a hole in it, and then stuck my head through it, yelling that I wanted my Charms book."

"Did you see anything?" Millicent asked, leaning forward.

"Yeah, I saw Ron, Dean, Seamus and McLaggen. They were all standing around a cauldron."

"What were they brewing?" Hermione asked.

"I don't know," Neville admitted, "I didn't get a good look at it, they chased me away first. I ran out of the Common Room and hid out there for awhile. I thought they were gone, so I started to go downstairs."

"Then what?"

"I don't know," Neville said, frustration evident upon his face. "Next thing I knew, I was here, and they said I fell down the stairs, but I don't remember any of it!"

"It's going to be okay," Hermione reassured.

Neville was no idiot. He wouldn't have tried to go down the stairs unless he was certain the way was clear. No, one of the Gryffindors had snuck up behind him, and hit him with a stunner as he walked down the stairs, trying to make it look like an accident.

"Have you told anyone yet?" Harry asked, to which Neville shook his head.

"No, not yet. They did this because I saw something. What would they do if I went to the professors?"

"He's right," Millicent said with a frustrated sigh, "but it still sucks.

Glancing to his left, Harry looked at Tracey, and saw the same anger he felt reflected in her eyes, which heartened him slightly. What he was about to declare, Tracey would support him unwaveringly. There were some lines you just didn't cross. Cursing Harry and Tracey's friend in the back and causing them to fall down the stairs?

That definitely crossed the fucking line.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

At dinner that night, it was difficult to even concentrate on eating, let alone keeping his thoughts straight. He certainly understood that Ron Weasley might have been grieving, still trying to come to grips with his brother's untimely death...but that did not stop him from wanting to rush over to the Gryffindor table and beat the stuffing out of Ron. He could do it, too. Ron wasn't exactly the most talented wizard in the world. However, common sense stilled his hand.

Still, it was difficult, especially when he saw Ron and the rest of his friends laughing jovially, while Hermione sat by herself at the table, her sole friend within the house gone.

"We ready?" Harry asked his two female Slytherin friends, having wolfed down dinner.

"Let's do this," Tracey replied quickly, while Millicent merely nodded.

Making their way through the throngs of students, many just arriving to dinner, they exited the Great Hall. Hermione eyes flickered upwards for a moment, her brown orbs filled with regret and apprehension, before lowering back towards her meal.

Hermione had been adamant about joining them, but Harry had been firm in his denial. While he had justified his actions by pointing out what happened to Neville when he had crossed the Gryffindors, that wasn't really his main motivation. After the horror she had experienced at the end of the first year, he couldn't help but feel protective of his friend.

Ascending the stairs leading up to Gryffindor Tower, they stopped at the fifth floor landing, and waited. Long ago Hermione and Neville had informed him where the Gryffindors had roomed, and he had been assured that Ron would have to pass through these stairs to get back.

"What do you think, fifteen minutes?" Millicent asked, placing herself against the stone wall that made up the right-hand side of the landing.

"Probably," Harry said with a shrug, "but it doesn't really matter, we'll wait all night if we have to."

He leaned against the wall next to her, and gazed back at the stairwell. They were slightly out of view of anyone coming up the stairs, but would have a clear view of anyone going up, which was ideal.

"You know this could all go really, really wrong, right?" Millicent asked.

"It could," Harry agreed, "but I'm still going to try. Neville did his part; it's time to do ours. Besides, I know the two of you can handle yourselves in a fight."

"Malfoy found that out last year," Tracey said with a smirk, her light blue eyes trained upon the stairs. "I think it's almost Weasley's turn."

As much as Harry wanted to give Ron a little payback, he hoped Tracey was wrong. While beating Ron down would be satisfying, it

wouldn't solve any of their long-term problems with the Gryffindors. No, they had to come to some sort of understanding.

After a ten minutes, following a few false alarms, Ron Weasley's gangly, red-headed form made its way up the stairs, followed by Seamus, McLaggen and a small, blond boy.

Here we go.

"Weasley!" Harry said loudly, stepping away from the wall. Ron froze in mid-step, before turning around, an ugly expression upon his face.

"What do you want, murderer?" he sneered.

Stepping forward, Harry looked up slightly at the taller boy.

"I know you've got a problem with me, but I'm not going to let you drag anyone else into this."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Ron scoffed, "everyone knows Longbottom's clumsy, probably wasn't paying attention and took a tumble."

Snickers from the other Gryffindors met his claim, setting Harry's teeth on edge.

"We know you stunned Neville from behind."

"You don't know anything," Ron snapped, "but even if I did, big deal, a traitor got knocked around."

"A traitor?" Tracey exclaimed, throwing her hands in the air. "What the fuck did he ever do to you?"

"He supported a killer," McLaggen spat, eyes narrowed.

Harry wanted to scream with frustration, but managed to keep his voice level.

"I don't know who you think you are," Harry said slowly, "but I had nothing to do with Percy's death. I-"

With previously unseen speed, Ron swung his fist forward, striking Harry in the jaw, cutting him off mid-sentence. Unprepared for the blow, Harry staggered backwards, his jaw stinging.

"You don't talk about him!" Ron screamed before rushing forward, fists raised.

So much for a peaceful solution. Ron wanted a fight, he was getting one.

Harry, prepared for the charge, leaned to the right, avoiding Ron's punch. Grabbing the charging boy, he turned his hips in, using Ron's momentum to hip-toss him. Keeping hold, Harry slammed Ron to the stone floor, knocking the breath from his lungs.

"Don't you fucking move!" Tracey screeched, wand trained on the remaining Gryffindors. Seamus and McLaggen stopped, identical snarls upon their faces, but the tiny blond boy continued to fumble for his wand.

As he rose to his feet, leaving Ron gasping for air, Tracey flung a stunner at the fumbling boy, felling him.

"Not as easy as jumping Neville from behind, is it?" Tracey demanded, the point of her wand shaking.

"Lousy snakes, you're going to pay for this!" Seamus promised, his features contorted with rage.

"What, did you think Harry was just going to let Weasley pound on him?" Millicent scoffed.

Following her words, another group of Gryffindors appeared on the landing, to the sight of their Housemates being held beneath Slytherin wands.

"What are you doing to Ron?" a light-haired brunette girl demanded, probably a third-year. Not waiting for an answer, the rest of the Housemates charged forward.

Fuck.

Moving backwards, Harry quickly transfigured the stone in front of them into ice. Unprepared for the surface change, the Gryffindors tumbled to the floor, creating a mass of tangled limbs.

"Get them!" a winded Ron urged, still struggling for breath. As the student struggled to their feet, the three Slytherins backed down the hallway, wands raised.

"Let's take these fuckers out!" Tracey yelled, wand already moving.

"No!" Harry said, eyeing the Gryffindors. "Start with shields; it can't look like we started it!"

"Fine!" Tracey snarled, conjuring a magical shield. Harry and Millicent's followed immediately after, completely blocking the first volley of spells, deflecting them into the walls. Pressing forward, the Gryffindors fired off another rounds of spells, which were efficiently batted aside by the superior shields of the Slytherins.

"Now!" Harry yelled, dropping his shield. They simultaneously fired off three stunners, dropping two of the Gryffindors. The brunette girl barely danced out of the way of the third one, responding with a body bind. Twisting his wand as he conjured a shield, he deflected the body bind right back at her, felling her before she could blink.

"Stagger your attacks, you idiots!" Ron commanded.

Conjuring another shield, Harry leaned into it, pouring his magic into it. The crimson shield effortlessly protected them all, but with the newly staggered attacks, they had no window of retaliation. Time for something different.

"Keep you shields up, and close you eyes," Harry ordered, dropping his own. Trusting that his friends followed his instructions, Harry thrust his wand forward.

"Exarsil!"

A brilliant white light burst forth from the tip of his wand. The unprepared Gryffindors clapped their hands over their eyes, moaning in pain. Harry kept his wand at the ready, but the fight appeared to have gone out of their opponents.

"What in the bloody hell is going on here?" a voice demanded, moving through the incapacitated students. Moments later, Oliver Wood, the burly Gryffindor Quidditch captain, pushed his way through the crowd, closely followed by the Weasley twins.

"We wanted to talk to Ron, but he was more interested in fighting," Harry said quickly, his body tensed. He was wary of Wood, who actually may know how to fight.

"You attacked us, you fucking liars!" Ron screamed, spittle flying from his mouth, apparently one of the few that had closed their eyes in time.

The twins looked slightly wary at Ron's outburst, as though he were an unpredictable pet. Were they having their own problems with Ron?

"Let's go back to the Common Room," George said with forced good cheer, slinging an arm about his younger brother's shoulder.

"No!" Ron exclaimed, shrugging off his brother. "We've got them outnumbered, let's teach those slimy Slytherins a lesson!"

To his unease, most of Gryffindor roared in approval, as if thirsty for blood.

"That's not how we do things around here," Wood said sharply, glaring at Ron. "Let them pass."

"You're go to let that murderer go free?" a livid Ron asked. "We've-

"Don't say another bloody word," Fred spat, his expression thunderous, before turning to his twin brother. Communicating wordlessly, George turned to the three Slytherins.

"Get lost," he said, motioning towards the stairwell.

"Um, thanks," Harry said, beneath the heavy, unkind stares of the other Gryffindors. Looking to his two friends he saw similar looks of bewilderment upon their faces.

What the hell was going on here?

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

"Wait, so you guys fought off an entire group of Gryffindors?" Blaise asked, shaking his head slightly.

"We did," Tracey confirmed with a small smile, leaning back in a large, green armchair.

"You three are all crazy," Blaise said matter-of-factly, eliciting a laugh from everyone else.

Following their confrontation with the Gryffindors they had returned to the Slytherin Common room, and discussed the rather unnerving details of the situation. Blaise and Daphne had entered into the conversation, the brief snatches of the trio's fight with the Gryffindors drawing their attention.

"Though," Millicent clarified, "it doesn't seem like all of the Gryffindors are out for our blood. Even the Weasley twins weren't really against us."

"I thought it was the Weasleys that had started this entire thing?" Daphne asked.

"No, just Ron," Harry replied. "It really seems that most of the craziness is coming from the younger students in Gryffindor. Maybe the older students are too smart to listen to Ron."

"Well, it probably didn't help that Tracey stunned a first-year, that Creevey kid, in front of a bunch of other Gryffindors," Millicent added, sending a scornful glance at Tracey.

"I told that little twat to freeze," Tracey said with a derisive snort, "and he didn't."

"That runt couldn't fight his way out of a paper bag. If you had ignored him, those other Gryffindors might not have charged."

"Who gives a fuck?" Tracey asked, giving a dismissive shrug. "I'm not tiptoeing around them. If they want to start something, I'm going to show them why it's a bad idea to screw with me."

"Yeah, great idea," Millicent said sarcastically. "You keep doing that, even the older Gryffindors are going to turn against us."

"Fuck 'em," Derrick said, plopping himself down in a chair next to Harry. "I say taunt 'em, piss 'em off some more, let them take shots at us in public. They may curse us a few times, but it will give us every excuse to fight back."

"I don't know," Harry replied uncertainly, "normally you're right, but this year...they seem different. It's like they're planning more this year, trying harder not to get caught."

"You're not kidding," Montague added, joining the conversation. "Last week in charms, that McLaggen tosser 'accidentally' spilled shrinking solution on my feet."

"Things like that have been happening all year," a dark-haired, older girl said casually, pulling up a chair next to Montague. "They really believe that you killed their Prefect," she said, looking in Harry's direction.

Harry sighed deeply.

"You're right, they do. No matter how many times I say I haven't, they never listen. After tonight, I don't know how I'm ever going to convince them."

"Yeah, heard you kicked some arse tonight," Derrick said proudly, give him a hearty slap on the back.

"Nice to finally have someone fighting back," the dark-haired girl muttered, "because it doesn't look like any of the professors are doing anything."

"Most definitely, sis," Yaxley agreed, sitting next to his apparent sibling. "If we didn't have Professor Snape here, we wouldn't have any support."

"Well - maybe," Harry said, "but look at it from their viewpoint. The Gryffindors, aside from the Sorting, are being really careful about this entire thing. They don't want the professor to know anything."

"Luckily for us, the Gryffindors aren't smart enough to keep this up forever," Tracey added with a smirk.

"Definitely. Sooner or later, they're either going to start making mistakes, or do something stupid," Daphne agreed.

"I don't know," Harry said slowly, disagreeing. "Even if that's true...something's making the Gryffindors absolutely insane this year. They're driven; they really believe I had something to do with Percy's death. Are a few mistakes really going to stop them?"

"It will at least make it harder," Blaise argued haughtily.

"No, Potter's got a point," Yaxley's sister said, eyeing him shrewdly. "You think we have to depend on ourselves more than anything, don't you?"

"I do. I hate the idea of sitting around, just waiting for the Gryffindors to screw up. We know the Gryffindors aren't going to stop, so we have to protect ourselves."

"We could just tell Flint that all the Gryffindors are trying to take out his Seeker," Blaise suggested, drawing a few laughs.

"We could, but Flint can't be everywhere at once," Harry reasoned. "No, we have to watch each others backs for once."

"In other words, show a little fucking solidarity for once," Tracey added, before glancing at Blaise. "Instead of trying to stab each other in the back."

"Everyone hates Slytherin already," Derrick scoffed, "we usually do look out for each other."

"Really?" Harry asked dubiously, raising an eyebrow. "When's the last time you stepped in when someone was picking on a first-year?"

"Probably never," Derrick admitted, "but even if we can protect each other, those fucking lunatics aren't going to stop. We might have to do something a bit more...permanent to scare them off."

"Like what?" Millicent questioned, concern in her voice.

"We're not there yet," Harry said sharply, surprising the Quidditch captain. "I know who's behind it all; it's just a case of figuring out how to deal with him."

"And how are you going to do that?"

"I'm working on it," Harry replied, not having the faintest idea how he could.

How did one reason with someone who hated you with a passion?

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Though it was still night outside, Harry rose from his bed and began to get dressed for the day. He still didn't like waking up early, but after months of Callie being mean and waking him up, he had begun to get up before she could bother him.

Leaving his room behind, he passed the twins' room and climbed down the ladder that connected the second floor to the attic. It was kind of annoying to have to climb down a ladder every day, but Callie had told him it was important. If the bad people ever came to the house, they could just fold the ladder into the ceiling, and no one would know there was an attic.

"Good morning, Harry," Corwin said to him at the bottom of the stairs.

"Hi," Harry replied to the short, kinda fat guy. He liked Corwin, he was always nice.

"I was just going to the kitchen, how would you like an omelet?" he asked, bending down slightly so their eyes were at the same level.

"Yeah!" Harry replied enthusiastically. "Can I have ham in it?"

"I suppose," Corwin replied, before going to the kitchen to start breakfast. Harry watched the man cook, amazed that someone could be that fast. His hands were almost too quick to watch as moved around the kitchen.

"So, Harry," the man asked between cracking eggs on the side of the skillet, "are you getting used to only sleeping four hours a night?"

"Kinda," Harry said with a shrug, "but I don't like it."

"You know why it's important though, right?"

"Yeah, I know, I know. I have a lot of things to do, so I can't sleep too much."

"Correct you are," Corwin said with a smile, turning on a flame on top of the stove.

"But why?" Harry asked. "All I'm doing is schoolwork and drawing stuff. Oh, and studying pictures."

"Well, all children have to go to school. And one day, you'll understand just why you're doing all of this."

"When?" Harry demanded, pouting.

At his question, the smile left Corwin's face.

"Far sooner than you should."

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Wednesday, on his way to his weekly meeting with Professor Lockhart, his thoughts traveled back to the latest memory he had received. During the time he had been locked in his mind, after the orphanage, he had wandered the house almost endlessly. He had never seen any sign of the attic, his thoughts concerned with breaking into the basement vault. Sometime, he was going to have to take a closer look at his childhood room.

However, far more important matters occupied his thoughts as he ascended the stairs. Though he thought suffering through Lockhart's company was originally going to be worth it, the lengths Lockhart was willing to go to exploit him...no, definitely not worth it. He'd rather be labeled a Dark Lord than as Lockhart's surrogate son.

"Good evening, Harry, have a seat," Lockhart greeted upon his arrival, which Harry did.

"So, how's my favorite student?" the blonde man asked, taking a seat behind his own desk.

Taking a deep breath, Harry chose his words carefully. While he wanted nothing to do with the man, he didn't want to alienate him completely. After all, he did have friends at the Prophet.

"Professor, I'm sorry, but I don't think I can do these extra things on the weekends."

Lockhart, without missing a beat, flashes his pearly whites.

"Why ever not, Harry? I was under the assumption that you enjoyed last Saturday."

"Oh, I did," Harry claimed, lying through his teeth, "but with classes getting more difficult, and the upcoming match against Slytherin, we practice every day. I really want to beat Gryffindor, professor."

Lockhart nodded in understanding.

"I know, it is a huge rivalry. Being a Chaser for Gryffindor back in the day, I should know! But, yes, that's fine, perhaps we could continue after that match?"

The thought was almost enough to make him sick.

"Yeah, definitely," Harry agreed, trying to sound excited by the prospect.

"Good, good. In that case, I shall not take up any more of your time."

"Well, there is one other thing," Harry said hesitantly, as Lockhart got up.

"Oh?"

"I'm really embarrassed about last week," Harry said, "and don't want anyone to know I...well, uh puked on you."

Lockhart's smile lost a little of its shine upon being reminded of the day, but he recovered quickly.

"Not to worry, Harry. The Prophet is saving the story for this weekend's edition, and they're not going to mention it."

"Well, that's not the only thing," Harry continued. "I appreciate what you're trying to do, but I already have guardians, and they're good people."

"Oh, Harry," Lockhart replied, letting out a fake laugh, "people do things like this all the time! Of course the Flamels are your true guardians, but we just want to strike a chord with public sentiment."

"I'm not comfortable with that, professor," Harry said, "and would really appreciate if you left that part out."

Lockhart nodded at his request.

"I understand, Harry. I'll owl the editor tonight, and have that part taken out of the article. I promise."

"Thanks a lot," Harry said, breathing a sigh of relief. If the Prophet had labeled him as Lockhart's surrogate son, he probably would have died of embarrassment.

Feeling slightly better about things, Harry and Lockhart exchanged their goodbyes. He had expected a bit of resistance from Lockhart on the issue, but had received none. Going back down the stairs, he mused that maybe the Lockhart article might actually do some good.

"Come...come to me...let me kill you."

Looking around wildly, Harry searched for the source of the voice.

"Come on out!" Harry yelled, spinning around, but still he saw no one.

"Let me rip...let me tear..."

The sound appeared to moving further away from him, down the fifth floor corridor. He was about to turn and flee, when a thought occurred to him.

What if one of his Housemates was being chased by a Gryffindor? Not too likely, considering that he couldn't see anyone...but who else could be talking?

"I smell blood!"

Praying he wasn't making a mistake, Harry withdrew his wand and sprinted down the hallway. Torchlight lit his way as he rushed down the deserted stone hallway. Why had the voice gone silent?

Turning the corner, he stopped sharply, his feet skidding on the floor for a moment.

In the middle of the hallway, Argus Filch, the school caretaker, lay upon his back. His eyes were open wide, stony, unblinking. Harry looked for any signs of life, such as the rise and fall of the man's chest, but there was nothing.

Filch was dead.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Author Notes:

Well, this chapter really laid the groundwork for the conflicts that Harry will face during his second year at Hogwarts. Hopefully their development turns out as interesting as it seems within my mind. I've been having some problems with the scene breaks on this site, so hopefully they work now. Makes for piss-poor reading without scene breaks. Okay, still trying to find scene breaks that work.

The next chapter may take a while. Due to real-life developments, I've been forced to work more overtime hours than I'd like, which will cut into my writing time. Time shall tell.

Any comments, suggestions or criticisms would be deeply appreciated. Even a quick "I liked it," or, "it sucked" will suffice. I'll make an effort to answer every review I get. Thanks to all that have reviewed, it has kept me writing.

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Twentieth Movement: Feeding the Flames

September 24, 1992

Though Harry had tried to conceal it, by the time breakfast rolled around the next morning, it was common knowledge that it had been him who had found Filch's body and alerted Lockhart. The information had spread through the Great Hall like a wildfire, reducing almost all conversation to conspiratorial whispers.

What could he do about it, though? With his already questionable reputation, even being in the vicinity of a dead body was enough to make him culpable in the eyes of the student body, which was certainly not the case. It appeared that Argus Filch's heart had simply given out, a natural death.

Harry wasn't so certain that was the case. The whispers he had heard, he was certain they were not imagined. Did the voice belong to the culprit?

"What was it like?" Nott asked, sitting down next to him.

"What was it like?" Harry replied incredulously to the solitary boy. One to usually sit by himself, today he had sat next to Harry, and his normally expressionless face was narrowed in concentration.

"Well, was it...scary?" Nott clarified after a pause, as if it had taken him a few moments to find the right words.

"It was," Harry answered slowly, "but...mostly it was sad. I saw him a few days ago, and he looked...really, really bad, and wasn't making any sense, asking about his cat."

"What'd he say about his cat?" Nott asked, leaning forward.

"Uh, he just asked if I knew where it was. I guess it's missing."

"You know, I can't remember the last time I saw Mrs. Norris," Millicent added. "Maybe losing her was the thing that...well..."

She trailed off, not quite sure how to finish the sentence. Before Harry could pursue her avenue of thought, a silence descended over

the Great Hall. Glancing to the head table, he saw that Dumbledore, adorned in midnight blue robes with stars upon them, rise to his feet.

"If I may have your attention for a moment," the Headmaster began, scanning the four student tables with his blue eyes, "I'm afraid that once again I must be the bearer of bad news. Argus Filch, who faithfully served at Hogwarts' caretaker for fifty-seven years, suffered a fatal heart attack last night."

At Dumbledore's words, Harry's mind began to bend beneath the weight of guilt. He had seen Filch, a few days before, and seen how bad of shape he was in. The caretaker clearly hadn't any idea of what he was doing, looked terrible, but Harry had said nothing, merely went about his business. How many others had seen Filch, and looked the other way, ignoring him?

And if Filch's death had been natural...why had Harry heard deranged whispers near where he had found Filch?

"Argus will be fondly remembered," Dumbledore continued, his voice devoid of its normal good cheer, "for his selfless work here at this institution of learning."

Selfless, Harry concluded, was a perfect choice of words. It was no secret that Filch had been somewhat of a terror during his time at Hogwarts, and had nearly universally disliked by the student population, but still he had continued to perform a thankless job for over a half-century. Even in his final days, he had gone unnoticed.

Thinking back to the scene, he could not shake the remarkably identical expressions shared by Filch and Percy Weasley. Both had worn permanent looks of surprise upon their face, as if they couldn't fully comprehend how swiftly death had come to them.

"In the interim, Hogwarts' house elves will resume all of Argus' former duties. Please join me in honoring a selfless, diligent man who served this school as faithfully as one possibly can."

His words spoken, Dumbledore raised his gold goblet, before being mimed by the entirety of the student and staff, Harry included.

The look of surprise...it stuck with Harry. Here was a man who had been very, very sick. He imagined that when one felt that sick, they

knew it, felt it in every fiber of their being. With the way Filch dragged himself around at the end, as confused as he may have been, what about his situation would have surprised him?

No, surprise, if that's what he had seen upon Filch's face, was the reaction of a thinking mind that is unable to wrap itself around a current situation. When Voldemort, in the guise of Quirrell, had flung a killing curse at the prefect, Percy hadn't know how to react. A professor flinging a killing curse at him?

Impossible.

For all Harry knew, Filch's death had truly been an unfortunate accident, but the whispers he heard...didn't he have a duty to bring this up to someone?

What if there was a killer stalking the halls of Hogwarts?

What if they struck again?

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

By the next morning, Harry still wasn't sure if Dumbledore's confirmation had hurt or helped him. While the normal venom he received from the Gryffindors was somewhat muted in comparison to normal days, he noticed that a far greater number of evil looks being flung his way by the Hufflepuffs, as well as a few Ravenclaws.

He couldn't say with any certainty, but with his name attached to the discovery of Filch's body, people may have automatically assumed that he was responsible. With all the vicious rumors swirling around the school, not to mention the Prophet's slander...it actually wasn't surprising that Dumbledore's words weren't enough to persuade everyone.

"Those lying bastards!" Tracey exclaimed, breaking him from his thoughts. Looking at her, he saw that the Daily Prophet was clutched tightly within her hands.

"Um, who?" Millicent ventured cautiously.

"You need to see this, Harry," Tracey said, sliding the newspaper across the table. Seeing the headline, he groaned aloud. How bad was this going to be?

A New Hope for a Lost Child:

Can Gilderoy Lockhart become the guiding light for Harry Potter?

- William Smith, Senior Daily Prophet Correspondent

With every sentence of the article his eyes took in, his vision grew more clouded with rage. No mention of his adoption by the Flamels. Insinuations that he had dabbled within the Dark Arts. Worst of all, however, they had dared to make the claim that Lockhart had become somewhat of a father figure to him.

Gilderoy Lockhart. The same man that had promised to have the article toned down had not only broken his promise, but had embellished on every existing detail.

"Breathe, Harry," Tracey urged, her blue eyes shining with uncharacteristic sympathy.

"That fucking twit," Harry whispered hoarsely, still aghast at Lockhart's actions. Did Lockhart really think he was going to let this go?

Without giving any prior warning, he jumped to his feet.

"Harry, you're not going to curse Lockhart, are you?" Millicent asked, only half-joking.

"No. I'm going to get that fraud fired."

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry closed his eyes as the hot water poured over him, the bone-deep cold that had penetrated his being finally beginning to depart. Never one to shy away from less-than-ideal conditions, Flint had extended their practice by an hour, probably with the intention of toughening them up. Harry thought pneumonia was a far more likely outcome than anything else, but chose to keep his opinion to himself.

Swathed in the accumulating steam, he lost all sense of time. He felt like he could stay there forever, when there was no freezing rain and hurricane-force winds.

"Hurry tha' fuck up, Potter!" Flint's voice roared, tearing Harry cruelly from his reverie. "I ain't got all fuckin' day!"

"I'm almost done!" Harry yelled back, before reluctantly shutting off the water. What did Flint want? Practice was over.

Quickly drying off, Harry threw on his clothes, before venturing outside. Flint was leaning against the side of the building, his expression dark.

"'bout fuckin' time," he spat, before marching towards the school. Finding it safe to assume he was supposed to follow, Harry did so, struggling to match the Captain's quick pace. Though the rain had slackened off almost completely, leaving a heavy mist in its wake, the ground was still slippery. He slid a few times, sheer luck preventing him from going ass over teakettle.

Flint was silent the entire time, never looking back, not even when entering into the castle.

"Um, where are we going?" Harry asked, finally able to make up some ground on the smooth stone floor on the interior.

"I heard ye had some trouble with tha' Gryffindors las' week," Flint said without turning, taking the stairs that led down into the dungeons.

"Nothing I couldn't handle," Harry shot back, sounding braver than he felt. "Besides, I had backup."

"Aye," Flint agreed with a slight smirk. "Ye proved that las' year when ye almos' killed those twats in tha' locker room. But ye weren't 'actly dealing with tha' fuckin' second-comin' of Merlin there."

"No," Harry admitted, "but only the younger Gryffindors are bothering me, and I can beat all of them."

"Yeah?" Flint asked, stopping. "How long ye think that's gonna last?" he asked dangerously, glaring at Harry. "You embarrass the cubs enough, they're gonna send the bigger ones afta' ye.

Keeping himself composed, Harry nodded. He thought that most of the older students were too old to believe dumb rumors which had spread through the school, but kept his musings silent.

"Ye need ta know how ta defend yeself," Flint said, pushing the door to his right open, and motioning for Harry to enter. Without comment, Harry apprehensively walked through the doorway.

It appeared to be an empty classroom. Dust covered every surface, while the desks had all been pushed to the far side of the room. There was more to see, but the door slammed shut from behind him, locking itself with a loud click.

"What the hell, Flint!" Harry yelled, giving the door a useless kick. Wasn't the Captain on his side?

"Maybe ye should worry 'bout what's in tha fuckin' room," Flint yelled, his voice slightly muffled by the door.

"Pulsus!"

Instinctively, Harry ducked, the energy from the banisher setting his hair on end. Turning, he saw the lithe form of Yaxley's sister, a curse upon the tip of her tongue, eyes narrowed in concentration.

"What the fuck?" Harry yelled, drawing his own wand.

"Percutio!"

An unfamiliar dark red curse sprung from her wand. Following its trajectory, Harry conjured a shield, twisting his wand. To his shock, the red spell ate through his translucent shield. It struck his chest like a battering ram, blowing him off his feet. His teeth clicked together painfully as he bounced off the wall behind him, jarring his wand loose.

Tasting blood, Harry dove towards his wand, only to have his outstretched hand hit by a dark blue curse. All feeling immediately fled it, the nerves deadened. Cursing he rolled to his side, narrowly

avoiding another spell. He went to launch himself up to mount a charge, but his right hand immediately collapsed upon having weight put upon it, sending him tumbling to the floor again. Before he could react, another crimson spell filled his vision, blotting out all else.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

"Ennervate."

Re-entering consciousness, Harry was first aware of a deep-rooted pain within his chest. Rubbing it gingerly to gauge the damage, he opened his eyes.

"Nap time's over," Flint declared from his standing position, a rare grin upon his face. Standing beside him was Yaxley's sister, whose arm was stretched down towards him.

"We never got the chance to properly introduce ourselves, but I'm Regina Yaxley," she greeted lightly, as if she hadn't just cursed him repeatedly.

"Whatthefuck," Harry slurred groggily.

Letting out a maniacal laugh, Flint reached down and pulled Harry roughly to his feet. He swayed uncertainly for a moment, before using the wall to brace himself.

"As the first match of the year grows closer, some of the older Gryffindors might decide to attack you," Regina said, her expression neutral.

"Ay've seen ye fight, Potter," Flint continued. "Ye ain't that bad, but ye hide behin' ye soddin' shields too fuckin' much, and tha' shite ain't gonna agains' someone who knows wha' tha' fuck they're doin'. Ye need te cut this pansy defensive duelin' shite."

"So," Regina continued, crossing her arms, "Flint asked me if I could show you a few things. He's right, you know," she said, glancing at the giant Slytherin for a moment. "You really need to develop an offensive arsenal."

"I have one," Harry replied defensively, "I just lead with shields."

"Not fuckin' good enough," Flint snapped irritably.

"By letting your opponent dictate the flow of the duel, you're forfeiting an important advantage. You have to pound your opponents heavily, make their movements and spells reactionary."

"Aye," Flint agreed. "ye better hear what she's sayin', Potter. I need me Seeker te know how te defend himself."

For a moment Harry thought about arguing with him, but reconsidered. Regina Yaxley, while known as one of the toughest duelers in the school, also had a reputation as an avid user of the Dark Arts. Was this going to help his reputation at all?

"Sure," Harry replied with a shrug. The general opinion of him was already bad, and probably couldn't get much worse. Just because he was learning from Yaxley, didn't mean he had to use the Dark Arts.

Besides, it couldn't hurt to learn from one of the best.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Several weeks later found Harry and Neville walking through the silent seventh floor corridor. Harry glanced quickly at the gargoyle guarding the Headmaster's office as they passed by. For a moment he questioned his choice to not go to Dumbledore with his problem, but quickly pushed the issue from his mind. He still did not trust the man.

"Are you sure about this?" Neville asked as they passed the Board's meeting room, the place where Harry had first met Algernon Longbottom late into his first year. He took in a deep breath, telling himself that Neville only had his best interests at heart.

Yes, I am," he replied patiently. "We're not learning anything, are we?"

"No," Neville conceded, "but this is a pretty big step."

Harry shrugged as they stopped in front of a heavy oak door, behind which was Algernon Longbottom's office. He had wanted to meet with Neville's uncle sooner, being his sole ally upon the Hogwarts'

Board of Governors, but it hadn't happened nearly as soon as he wanted it to.

"It is," Harry agreed, knocking upon the heavy door. Sure it was, but Lockhart was going to pay for his betrayal. Besides, it might be nice to actually learn something in Defense this year.

"Come in," a jovial voice urged.

Scrolls of parchment lined the floor of the office, with only a small path through the middle of the floor which had been worn down with time.

"Thanks for seeing us, Uncle Algie," Neville thanked.

Algernon waved his arm dismissively.

"It's my pleasure, I'm only sorry I could not meet with you two sooner, but I've been indisposed over the past month. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

Harry hesitated for a moment. What he was about to ask of Neville's great-uncle would have far reaching consequences.

"We want to know what it would take to get Lockhart sacked," Neville said, his voice level.

Algernon let out a laugh at his grand-nephew's statement.

"I'm not a huge fan of that strutting peacock myself, but why go to these lengths? He'll be gone by year's end, mark my words."

"Was he only hired for a year?" Harry asked, at which Algernon shook his head, sending his jowls aquiver.

"For the past fifteen years, we have never had a Defense instructor last for more than a year. Some say the position's cursed."

"Is it?" Neville asked.

"Hard to say, but some of the occurrences that have led to professors leaving...well, calling them unnatural would be an understatement of epic proportions."

At his explanation, Harry thought back to poor Quirrell, possessed by Voldemort. What were the odds of a wizard being possessed by the most powerful Dark Lord of the century?

"Regardless," Algernon continued, waving his hand dismissively, "sacking a professor, even an obviously incompetent one, is not an easy task, though in extreme cases, it may be possible. What has he done to deserve this?"

"Well," Neville began, "we're not learning anything. From what I've read, early years are really important to magical development, but all we do is act out scenes from his books."

Algernon shrugged.

"Poor instruction isn't exactly a new concept here. I trust you've all suffered through Professor Binns' classes?"

Both Harry and Neville chuckled lightly at his point.

"Did you read the Prophet article about Lockhart becoming a 'father' to me?" Harry asked, bile rising in his throat at the article.

"I did," Algernon admitted, "why'd you agree to it in the first place?"

Harry sighed at the question.

"The Prophet and a lot of students here....they don't have a high opinion of me. They think I – I killed Percy Weasley."

"That's preposterous."

"We know," Neville said, leaning forward, "but the entire school believes it, and the Prophet has been hinting it. Can you blame Harry for trying?"

"I suppose not," admitted Algernon, "would it be safe to assume you had no say in the article?"

"I thought I did," Harry spat bitterly. "Lockhart promised me he'd take out the part about being like a father to me. He lied."

"Lockhart's a lying, conniving con artist," Algernon stated, "and though I'm sorry he betrayed you, it's not a crime."

"That's not all though," Harry said, going on to describe the conversation that he had overheard in the Defense classroom. Algernon's interest, which had clearly been flagging, was re-ignited by his account.

"You said you couldn't place the second voice, correct?" the man asked, seeking clarification.

Harry shook his head.

"It seemed slightly familiar...but, no."

"If you heard it again, would you recognize it?"

"Yeah, definitely," Harry affirmatively answered. The cold tone to the voice, the air of complete superiority...he definitely would.

"Good, keep an ear out," Algernon urged, before running a hand through his rapidly thinning hair.

After a short silence, he addressed the two boys again.

"Do either of you have any idea how a talentless media sensation gets a teaching position such as this?"

Harry shook his head, as did his friend. It was a question they had asked themselves many a time.

"Nor do I," Algernon admitted, "but early this summer, the Board pushed very, very hard to push through Lockhart's appointment as a professor. From what you two have told me, it seems like this Lockhart's one chance to save his flailing career. I'd be willing to be a galleon that the person he was talking to was on the Board."

"What did the Board member get in return, though?" Neville asked.

"I have no idea," Algernon replied, "but this whole situation concerns me."

"Who do you think Katelyn Wellington is?"

"Someone Lockhart doesn't want anyone to know about," Algernon answered. "I've never heard the name before, but I'll look into it, see what I can do."

It wasn't a promise, but any chance at getting Lockhart kicked out was better than nothing.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Within the small, featureless room that Harry had come to hate so much. Today was even worse, as he was sitting across from Crowley, his least-favorite person in the house.

Crowley never smiled, he never joked...but, it wasn't like he was really mean. It just felt like if he let Crowley down, made a mistake or something, he might get yelled at.

"Are you ready?" he asked in a bored tone of voice.

"Yes," Harry answered nervously.

"Good," Crowley replied humorlessly. "I want you to think of a number from one to ten."

Closing his eyes, Harry pictured the number four. That's what you got when you added two and two. Or one and three.

"Okay, I've got it," he said.

"Now, I'm going to try to discover what that number is. You are to keep me from finding out, by any means necessary. Do you understand?"

Harry nodded, clearing his mind as he did so. He thought of all the things that had happened in his time here, burying the number as deeply as he could. More than anything, he thought of the bad things. Those were supposed to be the best.

Hearing Crowley say one of his strange words, Harry felt something poking his mind. Instantly, Harry thought of the time he had had that fight with the mean twin, Rich. All around the room they had rolled, hitting each other. Tired of getting beat around, Harry had run out of

the room, slamming the door as he did. Rich, who had reached out his hand, got his fingers stuck in the door, ripping off two of his fingernails. Bright blood had immediately began to spill onto the hardwood floor, and oh now Rich screamed, all while Harry, tears in his eyes, said sorry over and over-

The memory began to break apart, like a photograph on fire. Concentrating, Harry let the memory go, and brought up another one, like a shield.

Harry had felt it was going to be the last good day of the year. Had to be, but stupid Callie had still made him stay inside, to work on his studies? Why couldn't he go out? It's not like the stupid exercises couldn't wait. He had been so angry at Callie, that all he could do was scream and scream. As he did, the window behind Callie shattered, spraying glass all over-

Quicker than last time, the memory crumbled, causing Harry to quickly replace it.

More than any other thing, Harry wanted-

Before he could even set the memory, it faded. No, he couldn't let Crowley win!

Kicking out as hard as he could, he struck Crowley in the shin with his shoe. His foot rebounded painfully off his lower leg, causing Harry to wince with pain. For a short moment, it felt like it had worked, as the thing in his mind drew back a little.

Before Harry even had time to consider his action, he felt Crowley rip through the rest of his memories like they were paper, sending a huge wave of pain through his head. Gasping, a vision of a large, floating number four rose to the front of his mind.

Face burning with shame, wondering what Crowley was going to do about his failure, Harry looked up.

Crowley had a small, pleased smile upon his face.

"Why did you kick me, Harry?"

He wanted to lie, but Crowley would know if he had.

He always knew.

"The memories weren't working," Harry said, his eyes glued to the floor, "so I tried to stop you another way."

"Look at me, Harry," Crowley commanded. Slowly, Harry did as asked.

"You have done well today."

"Uh, how come?" Harry asked, feeling confused. "I couldn't keep you out."

"A fact which is unsurprising, but you did use all the tools you had at your disposal, and even tried to improvise. One cannot search your mind if they are incapable of concentration, a fact you seized upon when left with no other alternative. No, I believe that now you are ready to progress to the next step."

Harry smiled for a moment, feeling pride that cranky Crowley actually approved of him.

"What do I have to do next?"

"Tomorrow, we began to Shape, Harry."

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

November 6, 1992

Though he still received more than his fair share of poisonous glances, Potions had become a much more enjoyable affair following the flare-up in mid-September. Apparently, tales of Parvati's detention had deterred any further Gryffindors from following her violent example. The details were unavailable to Harry, but whatever had transpired, it had caused the normally garrulous girl to remain silent in Potions unless directly called upon.

With this slightly uneasy truce in effect, Potions class had almost regained a sense of normalcy. That is, until today.

The first Quidditch match of the school year, Gryffindor versus Slytherin, was tomorrow. Over the past week, there had been an escalation in the malice between the two Houses, though for once, it was not entirely one-sided. Fights and impromptu duels had become a daily occasion. The anticipation of the event seemed to charge the very particles within the air, creating a volatile atmosphere that made every step throughout the school a nerve-wracking one.

A sigh of relief escaped Harry's lips as he placed a flask of his potion upon Snape's desk, as yet another Potions class had passed without incident. He had to admit, constantly being on edge was starting to affect him in a negative fashion. The weight of keeping his guard up continuously, trying to anticipate any attack from the Gryffindors, was becoming a far too heavy emotional burden.

"Potter," Snape said dismissively, without looking up from the parchment he was marking, "you and Mister Nott are to remain seated once class has ended. Understood?"

"Y-yes sir," Harry answered, slightly surprised by Snape's words. The Potions Master took a very hands-off approach to the students within his own House, and rarely seemed to interact with them. What was going on?

Wondering, he made his way back to his desk and spread the news to Nott, who shrugged in response, apparently uncaring. Considering his apparent apathy towards everything, he probably didn't.

Watching as his friends within Slytherin dropped off their potion samples; it became clear that Snape wished to talk to all of the members of his House. When the bell signaling the end of class began to toll, Harry swore that he saw slight disappointment upon the faces of most of the Gryffindors when they alone rose. Had they been planning something?

"Mister Finnegan," Snape said, his voice cold, "you are dismissed."

Turning, Harry saw the sandy-haired boy standing outside the classroom.

"Uh, yes sir," Seamus said shakily, beneath the Potion Master's formidable gaze. He promptly turned heel and walked away.

Smirking slightly, Snape flicked his wand, causing the door to the Potions classroom to close.

"It is encouraging that none of you have embarrassed our House during this idiotic time of the year," Snape said. "I assume that all of you have had some sort of altercation this year with some of the Gryffindors?"

Harry voiced his assent, as did the rest of his classmates.

"Potter, you would appear to be their main target; have they bothered you at all this week?"

"Not really," he replied, shaking his head. "On Monday, Flint threw McLaggen down a flight of stairs for bumping me too hard. They've gotten a bit skittish since then."

Normally Harry wouldn't rat out people, but he was sick of the abuse handed down by the Gryffindors. If Snape made McLaggen's life hell during Potions, well, who was he to stand in the way of karmic retribution?

"Good," Snape replied with a malevolent smile.

"Professor, what's wrong with them this year?" Blaise asked suddenly, "it's like they've all gone insane."

"I don't have an answer, but Professor McGonagall has promised to get to the heart of it."

Judging by his tone, Snape wasn't exactly optimistic about her chances.

"Regardless," he continued, "I would not be surprised if their insanity reached a fever pitch tonight. Between classes, I don't want any of you traveling by yourself. After class, you are all to return directly to the Slytherin dormitories."

"What if we travel in groups after class?" Daphne asked.

"It was not a request, Miss Greengrass," Snape replied icily. "You will do exactly as I have outlined, is that clear?"

"Yes, sir," she replied meekly, fully understanding that challenging the head of Slytherin House was often a bad idea.

"Good, you're all dismissed. If I find out that any of you have disobeyed my orders, the consequences will be...most unpleasant."

With those comforting words, they rose from their seats.

"Potter, I'd like a further word with you," said Snape, his voice expressionless. "The rest of you can wait outside for a moment."

Shite.

Wondering what he did to draw the ire of the Potions Master, he remained seated as the rest of his House filtered out. Millicent favored him with an encouraging smile as she exited, while Tracey struggled not to laugh at his predicament. As they closed the door behind him, Harry felt his unease grow.

"Potter, what exactly happened the night you found Filch?"

He froze for a moment, slightly surprised by the question. He had already told the story once to Lockhart, who had spread it to the other professors, but if Snape wanted to hear it again...fine.

Slowly, he recalled the events of the night, leaving out the part about the whispers. He wasn't even sure if they were real anymore.

"You're leaving something out, Potter," Snape claimed.

"Well – um...it's not important," replied Harry, clumsily.

"I suspect there was nothing natural about the manner in which Filch died, and I will not put any more of my students at risk."

"You don't think it was a heart attack?" Harry asked.

"What I think is irrelevant without concrete information to build a hypothesis upon. Out with it," Snape demanded, his voice denying the option of refusal.

"I – I thought I heard whispers," Harry admitted. "They were what led me to Filch."

"What sort of whispers?"

"It – it wasn't like anything," he replied, struggling to describe it properly. "I've never heard a voice like it. It said it wanted to kill – to rip apart."

"Are you sure, Potter?" Snape asked, raising an eyebrow.

"That's what I heard," Harry answered quietly, blush rising in his cheeks. "Maybe I imagined it though."

"You either heard it, or you did not," Snape drawled. "Regardless, I believe your friends have waited long enough. Get out of my sight."

Though the Potions Master's words were caustic, as usual, there hadn't been much disbelief in them. Did Snape actually think he might be telling the truth? Though he was curious, he knew better than to ask. Picking up his book bag, he walked towards the door.

"Potter," Snape called out. "I've grown rather fond of having possession of the Quidditch Cup. Do not let Slytherin down tomorrow."

"I won't, sir."

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

"All semester, ye've had ta watch ya backs. Evry time ya turn 'round, those fuckin' cunts curse ya in tha back, an' then say we're tha fuckin' problem. Gryffindor lions? More like fuckin' pussies. Ya know why, though?"

Flint's furious gaze swept over the rest of the Slytherin team.

"It's cause their fuckin' scared. Out there," Flint said, pointing towards the direction of the Quidditch pitch, "they can't hide behind any of tha professors, or fade into tha crowd. Out there, it's jus' them and us."

A malevolent smile broke out onto the captain's face, the likes of which would cause many a stout heart to falter.

"But they haven't seen anythin' yet. Let's show those pussies that us snakes won't be fucked with."

A roar filled the small room as the rest of the team jumped to its feet, inspired by their captain's words. Harry's own thoughts gravitated towards the countless times he wished he could curse the Gryffindors without repercussion. It wasn't exactly the same, here, but at least he would get a chance to embarrass them in front of the entire school.

Broom tucked beneath his arm, he followed the rest of his teammates into the bright sunshine. The cheers of the crowd met his ears as they approached the stadium; somewhat dulling the inspiration Flint's earlier words had conjured. Though the day was beautiful, there was a certain uneasiness in the air, similar to that of an approaching storm.

Upon entering the stadium, the cries from the crowd increased in volume. The alternating cheers from the Slytherin stands and hisses from the Gryffindor ones blended into one cacophony. Glancing into the box reserved for the professors, he saw that they looked tense, uncomfortable, none more so than Professor McGonagall.

At a further increase in decibels, Harry turned around, to see the Gryffindor Captain, Oliver Wood, lead his team onto the field. Searching the faces, including those of the Weasley twins, whose faces were uncharacteristically grim, he realized that none of the antagonists throughout the year were on the Quidditch team. Did being on the Gryffindor Quidditch team protect them from the rest of their House's stupidity?

"I want a clean, fair game," Hooch warned, glancing at both of the teams' respective captains with her strange yellow eyes. The captains nodded distractedly, scarcely paying any attention to the Professor.

"I will not hesitate to eject any of you," Hooch said coldly, clearly not pleased by their reaction. Shaking her head, she blew her whistle, tossing the Quaffle high into the air.

"And we're off!" exclaimed the commentator, Lee Jordan. "Flint kicks off the biggest season-opening match we've seen by muscling his way to the Quaffle. Spinnet's going to – no, she missed!"

From his position high above the pitch, scanning for the golden Snitch, Harry saw Spinnet's failed attempt to steal the Quaffle, sending a groan from the Gryffindor stands. Scowling, she resumed her pursuit.

"Spinnet just misses the steal, but she's not giving up! Flint to Yaxley, beginning his first season as starter. Yaxley avoids a bludger, flips to Montague. Montague avoids one of the Weasley twins, throws it up, Flint's got it – I don't believe it!"

Fred's bludger struck Flint in the shoulder, but the Captain had shrugged off the blow like it was a gnat, and was streaking towards the hoops.

"Come on Wood, you've got – no! Flint scores!"

Raucous cheers rose from the Slytherins stands. Flint pumped his fist once, sneering at Wood, before making his way back to the Slytherin end of the pitch. Harry allowed himself a single cheer before resuming his search for the Snitch.

"That's not how Gryffindor wanted to start, but we've still got plenty of time! Johnson advances the Quaffle, passes to Bell. Montague – no, great bludger from Fred, er, no, George. Bell still with possession, Flint charging – bloody hell! No-look pass to Johnson! It's just her and Bletchley. She fires – she scores! Tie game!"

Harry groaned as Flint began to loudly berate Bole for his terrible bludger work.

"And the Slytherin Captain is not happy."

Loud cheers from the Gryffindor stands met Lee's mocking observation. Ignoring them, Harry resumed his search for the Snitch.

"The score tied, a goal apiece, Montague advances the Quaffle. Montague to Flint, Flint to Yaxley – great steal by Bell! Bell to Spinnet – no, bludger by Derrick. Yaxley gains possession, avoids a nice Weasley bludger, flips to Flint! Come on Wood! Flint shoots – save by Wood!"

Diving to the left, the Quaffle bounced off Wood's outstretched fingertips, causing a deafening scream of delight from the Gryffindor stands. Flint, looking apoplectic, began to talk to himself as he made his way back to his end of the pitch.

"After that spectacular save by Wood, Spinnet takes the Quaffle – stolen by Yaxley! He scores!" Lee groaned.

The Gryffindors fell silent, stunned by the quick turnaround, just as Wood had been, unable to set himself. Slytherin began to mock the awareness of Spinnet, causing several small yelling matches between the two stands.

"And even the students in the stands have gotten into it. Who decided to put the Gryffindor and Slytherin stands next to each other? Anyway, 20 – 10, Slytherin. Spinnet takes the Quaffle up the pitch, passes to Johnson. Just misses a bludger, Flint rushing to meet – no!"

Flint flew into Angelina's path, causing a mid-air collision. Flint barely moved, but she was almost bounced off her broom, her teeth clicking together loudly. It was only the grace of good luck which kept her on the broom. Hooch, scowling, blew her whistle and began to berate a bored looking Flint.

"That dirty, cheating snake! That's got to be a...yes, it's a penalty! Two shots for Gryffindor! Maybe those cowards will think twice next time!"

Shaking his head at the biased commentary, Harry watches as Johnson, in obvious pain, but soldiering on, flew towards the hoops for the penalty shot. Long, dark braids trailing behind her, she fired the Quaffle past Bletchley, causing more groans from the Slytherin side.

"And Johnson makes the Slytherins pay with a great shot. Here she goes again – yes, she does it! Gryffindor takes the lead, 30 – 20!"

As Hooch was flying back to the middle of the pitch, Harry saw movement rushing towards him. Without thinking, Harry accelerated, barely avoiding the crimson-clad form of the Gryffindor Seeker.

"Shouldn't you be looking for the Snitch?" Harry asked crossly.

"Shouldn't you be in Azkaban?" Towler retorted, charging forward. Harry leaned his broom to the left, kicking out his foot. It clipped Towler off the chin, driving the blonde boy backwards. Shaking his head, but apparently undeterred, Towler surged forward again.

"What the fuck is your problem?" Harry demanded, sick of Towler's posturing. He had a Snitch to catch, and this wasn't helping.

"My problem is you," the Seeker spat venomously, charging again. Harry dropped like a stone, easily avoiding the attack.

"And what's this? Even the Seekers are going at one another!"

"Wood, how about controlling your Seeker? Or would you like Flint to?" Harry screamed, sick of having to avoid attack.

Scowling, Wood speared his Seeker with a scathing glance, before calling a time-out.

"Towler, get your arse down here!"

Looking furious, the Seeker did as told, where he proceeded to be chewed out by his captain.

"That's not how we play, Ken! You play the Snitch, not the Seeker! What the hell is wrong with you?"

Harry didn't hear the reply, but whatever it was, Wood didn't like it.

"I don't care what the Prophet says! I care about whether we win or lose! Everything else, you leave behind while you're up in the air!"

Grateful that at least some of the Gryffindors were capable of rational thought, Harry flew over to Flint. The Slytherin Captain didn't offer much than rather frightening threats, but it was over rather quickly, leaving both teams to take to the air once again.

Back and forth the match went, no team gaining more than a twenty point lead. At the half-hour mark of what was becoming an increasingly chippy game, the score was tied at eighty, and tempers were running high, Harry's among them. His scans of the pitch had proved completely fruitless, with nary a glint of the snitch.

"Bell advances the Quaffle, hoping to break this tie – no, I don't believe it!"

Bole, for reasons known only to himself, had taken a swing at the Gryffindor Chaser, missing her head by inches. Despite the foolishness of his decision, Slytherin began to stand and applaud, further inciting the Gryffindors.

"And after that disgusting cheating, it will be another two penalty shots for Gryffindor. Come on, Katie, you can...oh no!"

Gryffindor let out loud groans as a flustered, shaken Katie missed her first penalty shot. The Slytherin stands wasted no time, rising to their feet and giving the teenager a round of applause. Her color rising, matching those of her robes, Katie flew back to prepare for the second shot. The Gryffindor cheering had turned to shouts of indignation at Slytherin's harassment of their Chaser.

"And the Gryffindors are not happy! The Headmaster might have to conjure a wall between the two stands if this continues!"

Though Lee was joking, Harry couldn't help but think it might be a good idea. Glancing towards his two closest friends within Slytherin, he saw a flying tomato just barely miss Tracey and slam into the side of Millicent's head, splattering tomato over the immediate vicinity.

Tracey was the first to react, screaming in rage at the red dripping from her hair, prompting an exultant cheer from the Gryffindor stands.

"Take that, you lousy snakes!" Lee screamed into the microphone, unknowingly sowing the seeds of pandemonium.

"What in the bloody hell is he thinking?" Harry said to himself, watching as McGonagall ripped the microphone from him, and began to berate him. Red faced, she raised the microphone to her lips.

"This sort of behavior is absolutely unacceptable! If the spectators cannot control themselves, this match will be cancelled!"

Looking disgusted, the black-haired witch practically slammed the microphone back into Lee's hand, causing him to stagger back.

"Well, um, Bell lined up for another penalty shot, and...no, not again!"

Bletchley had stopped the Chaser's shot with a lucky, fingertip save. Dejected, Bell flew back to her side of the pitch. Her miss sent the Slytherin stands into hysterics, mocking laughter following the Chaser all the way back to her side.

Wondering if another Gryffindor was going to dare to throw more tomatoes, Harry's jaw fell open as he saw a third-year Gryffindor jump to his feet, wand drawn, and launch a crimson spell at a group of clustered first years.

"Shite!" Harry swore, helpless to watch as the spell struck the first-year, Harper, in the chest. It exploded in a rain of crimson blood and...gold?

Harper, splattered from head to toe in crimson and gold, stood for a moment, a horrified look on his face, before bursting into tears. As Harry realized it had merely been a modified paint spell, the Gryffindors began to cheer wildly. Apparently too pleased with himself to care, the offending Gryffindor took a bow.

Before he could lower his arms, a green spell struck the blonde pre-teen in the face. Without warning, the humor fading from his eyes, he forcefully vomited forth a large slug. It fell gracelessly onto the head of the girl in front of him, where it exploded, soaking her dark hair with greenish-yellow innards.

"Not so funny now, is it?" Blaise demanded, his wand pointed at the still-puking Gryffindor.

Three of the blonde Gryffindors friends immediately jumped over the small gap separating the two stands, and pushed Blaise backwards. Younger students scrambled away as they began to pummel him, the dark-skinned Slytherin flailing helplessly.

"I don't believe it, fighting in the stands!" Lee exclaimed, shock in his voice. The Professors of Hogwarts had already begun to move, but

it would be at least a minute until they could assert any sort of control.

"Fuck this," Harry said to himself. Pointing his broom downwards, he shot through the air, towards the Slytherin stands. He wasn't exactly friends with Blaise, but after being on constant alert against attacks from the 'noble' House, the sight of the three scarlet-clad students ganging up on the dark-skinned boy spoke to something within him. Blood boiling, Harry swore that this time, instead of turning the other cheek, he was going to make these cowards pay.

Besides, the game was probably going to be thrown out anyway.

Racing towards the stands, he saw Tracey rushing towards the fracas, fire in her eyes. She flung a stunner at the largest Gryffindor boy, causing him to crumple mid-punch. More spells followed, felling the other two.

"They're attacking the Gryfs! Get them!"

As Ron Weasley's unmistakable voice rang out over the stands, a score of Gryffindors jumped over the small gap, and began to close on the remaining Slytherins. Where the fuck was the rest of his teammates?

Landing in the stands, Harry rapidly dismounted, drawing his wand. Surrounded by skirmishes, Harry pointed it at the nearest crimson and gold source he could find.

"Stupefy!"

Parvati Patil fell like she had been shot, bouncing hard against the bench. Seeing her friend go down, Lavender screamed in rage.

"Potter just killed Parvati!"

Before she could say anymore, Harry took her out with a quick stunner, but the damage had already been done. Angry Gryffindors began to move away from their own scuffles, and gravitate towards him.

Fucking great.

Jumping up to the next bench, Harry narrowly avoided a slug-vomiting hex, and responded with a body-bind, causing an older Gryffindor to fall to the ground, stiff as a board.

Ducking, Harry narrowly avoided a tripping hex from Seamus.

"You're fucking dead!" the sandy-haired Gryffindor promised, flinging another tripping hex. Harry, more than ready, prepared to deflect it back at the caster, but fingers dug into his hair, pulling his head back sharply, interrupting the cast.

"You're not getting away this time, Potter," Ron Weasley promised, pulling back hard. Harry felt strands of hair rip from his head as he fell backwards, already off balance. His back landed awkwardly upon the bench, sending a flare of pain through it. He immediately went to bring his wand up and blast Ron, but the redhead stomped upon his wrist, pinning it to the ground.

Before he could react, a body-bind struck him. His wand fell from his hands as his body snapped to rigidity.

"Now we've got you!" Ron declared, a manic gleam in his eye. Helpless, Harry watched as the Gryffindor raised his wand, a smile of triumph upon his face.

Without warning, a huge form flew from Harry's peripherals, and smashed into Ron from behind. The youngest Weasley brother went flying headfirst, directly into a concrete post decorated in silver and green. The boy's head hit with a loud crack, splattering scarlet blood upon the Slytherin-colored post. He crumpled to the ground, unmoving, blood welling from his head.

This all went unseen to Millicent, who immediately turned to Harry and undid the body-bind. As soon as he regained movement of his legs, a loud thunderclap broke out over the stands, momentarily sending Harry into a daze.

"I believe that will be quite enough," Dumbledore said calmly from atop the stands, above all the students. His voice, even yet resonant, washed over the frenzied students, sapping them of the anger that had driven them to fight. All over, students lowered their wands, suddenly looking unsure of themselves. Even Tracey, her wand pointed at McLaggen's heart, felt his calming power.

Shaking his head, clearing the cobwebs, Harry looked up at the frowning form of Millicent.

"Thanks for the help."

"No problem," she replied with a shrug, helping him to his feet. All around him, students were doing the same, picking up their fallen brethren.

"Millie, what the fuck is wrong with them? Fighting in front of the professors?"

"Who knows?" she said, shaking her head. "A bad case of insanity?"

Indeed, who knew? To start a fight in the open like this...were things even worse than he had imagined? In just a single minute, before Dumbledore could assert his control, two entire Houses had been turned against each other.

And just what would Ron have done if Millicent hadn't gotten there in time?

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Clustered to the left side of the Headmaster's Office were the six remaining second-year Slytherins. Across the room, attempting to put as much distance as they could between them, were their Gryffindor counterparts, minus Ron Weasley. Behind his desk, Dumbledore stood, like a god surveying two armies preparing for war. His expression was somber, while his normally bright, inquisitive eyes were dimmed, bereft of his trademark twinkle.

Since yesterday's eruption during the Quidditch match, of which nearly a third of both Gryffindor and Slytherin were involved in, Dumbledore had been holding private meetings with each year, trying to determine the source of their disagreements.

Unsurprisingly, nothing had been solved. Nor, Harry supposed, would this one be any different. He was certain Ron Weasley was behind everything, who currently resided within Infirmary. The youngest Weasley brother was going to recover, an overnight stay had been required to heal properly.

"Well," Dumbledore began, breaking the heavy silence, "it would appear that this year there are some rather heated disagreements between Slytherin and Gryffindor. While this rivalry has a storied history, rarely have I ever seen it approach this volatile a level."

No student responded to Dumbledore's words. There was no need. Every day this term they had experienced it.

"I would like to see if today we could resolve some of those problems," Dumbledore continued, undeterred by the lack of reaction. "What do you think, Mister Nott?"

Theodore blinked upon being suddenly called upon, but had no other reaction.

"This is all fairly simple," the quiet, strange boy responded.

"Is it?" Dumbledore asked, clearly intrigued by Nott's assertion. "Would you care to elaborate?"

"The Gryffindors are looking for someone to blame, and we're the best target they have."

A few of the Gryffindors flung dirty looks at Nott and grumbled amongst themselves, but no one voiced their opposition clearly.

"Thank you, Mister Nott," Dumbledore said with a nod, before turning to the other side of the room. "What do you think of Mister Nott's claims?"

"They're all liars!" Seamus exclaimed violently. Silence followed his statement, causing his face to grow scarlet. Trying not to chuckle, Harry deduced Seamus had been counting on some vocal support.

Dumbledore nodded thoughtfully, as if Seamus had just brought up an interesting counter-argument.

"And what, may I ask, brings you to such a conclusion, Mister Finnegan?"

The sandy-haired Gryffindor shook his head, clearly unwilling to part with any more information. Sighing, Dumbledore rubbed his temple, before addressing the entire room.

"It is of the utmost importance that today, some progress is made towards identifying the problem between your two Houses," he urged, his blue eyes scanning those of his students. "If any one of you has any insight, I would be very appreciative if it were shared."

Neville let out a heavy sigh.

"Well, I've already been beaten up once for speaking my mind," the pudgy boy recalled, "so I'm almost used to it by now."

"Shut up, Longbottom!" Seamus hissed.

"That will be enough for now, Mister Finnegan," Dumbledore said sharply. Though he didn't raise his voice, Seamus recoiled like a wand had been drawn upon him.

"Please, continue," Dumbledore urged, his tone reverting back to its normal cadence.

"I don't know why, but for some reason, a lot of people in my House think that Harry murdered Percy, and it's made...made them crazy."

Neville trailed off as he finished, his eyes finding the floor. Harry found himself proud of his friend, finding the courage to speak out against his House.

"Thank you very much, Mister Longbottom," Dumbledore said graciously, before eyeing the right side of the room. "Is this true?"

The rest of the Gryffindors, as if on cue, averted their eyes downward, prompting another sigh from the Headmaster.

"I shall have to take that as a positive. Let me assure you all, Harry Potter was in no way culpable in Percy Weasley's death. Far from it, Mister Potter himself tried to stop the spirit from harming anyone, and faced grievous injury for his efforts."

To Harry's surprise, some of the Gryffindors began to look unsure of themselves. Was this really all it took?

Seizing the moment, Dumbledore pushed onward.

"It would appear that all of this unpleasantness has been a simple misunderstanding. Is there anything else that anyone wishes to add?"

Though no one had anything further to say, Harry felt momentarily grateful to the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot. Aside from Seamus and Parvati, it appeared that Gryffindor had begun to seriously question Harry's role in Percy's death. Would it be enough, though?

With nothing further to discuss, Dumbledore dismissed them. Harry and the other Slytherins stayed back, long ago learning that walking close to a Gryffindor was an excellent way to get discreetly cursed. While there may have been progress today, he wasn't exactly willing to let down his guard. Especially considering Ron hadn't been in attendance.

Harry considered thanking Dumbledore for a second, before changing his mind and heading towards the door.

"Do you think this is going to change anything?" Millicent asked as they were whisked down the spiral staircase.

"Who knows?" Tracey replied skeptically. "Dumbledore's already said all of this at the beginning of the term. They might forget again in five minutes."

Shaking his head as Daphne and Blaise chuckled darkly, Harry stepped out into the hallway, to be confronted with the large form of Dean Thomas, who had an uncharacteristically grim look in his eyes. Without warning, he reached forward and grabbed Harry by the front of his robes.

"We still know the truth, Potter," Dean sneered, giving him a healthy shake. As he did, Harry felt a weight settle into one of his pockets. Millicent and Tracey darted forward to help him, but Dean had already let go, and had begun backing away.

"We're still watching you," Dean said coldly. As he spoke, he gave a barely perceptible shake of his head, before turning and storming down the hall, after his waiting cohorts within Gryffindor.

Tracey started to draw her wand, but Harry put his hand on her arm.

"No, that's what they want, for us to start a fight. Let's just go back to our room," he urged.

Tracey eyed him skeptically, before shrugging and turning around.

"That's rather odd," Blaise drawled as the six students made their way back to the dormitories. "Dean always seemed fine. I guess Gryffindor stupidity is contagious."

Harry shook his head.

"That's not what happened."

Reaching into his pocket, he withdrew the object that Dean had placed into it, under cover of threatening him. It was a rock, which had a small piece of parchment wrapped around it, secured with an elastic band.

"What's that?" Daphne asked, scrunching her face in confusion.

"Dean's anger did have a forced aspect to it," Nott said matter-of-factly, before continuing down to the dungeons.

Mystified, Harry undid the elastic and unwrapped the parchment from the rock.

Harry

We need to talk. Tomorrow, eight o' clock, in the owlery. Come alone.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

As instructed, Sunday night, at eight o' clock exactly, Harry ascended the last of the stairs that led up to the owlery. Pushing through the door, he saw Dean Thomas pacing nervously upon the dropping-splattered straw that covered the floor.

The tall, dark-skinned Gryffindor looked up at this arrival, letting out a relieved breath at his arrival.

"I...I'm glad you came, I didn't think you were going to."

"I almost didn't," Harry admitted with a shrug, "thought it might have been a trap."

"What made you decide to come?"

"It doesn't matter," Harry replied with a shake of his head, "I'm here. What's so important?"

Dean turned and placed his hands on one of the glassless windows, staring out into the night, as if the night air held the answer. Harry let him have his moment of reflection. Assuming this wasn't just some elaborate trap, Dean was taking an enormous risk. After a moment, Dean took a heavy breath, and turned around.

"Something very bad is going to happen soon."

"Worse than getting attacked from behind by a classmate?" Harry snapped, his temper getting the better of him.

Dean looked slightly mollified for a moment, before swallowing heavily and shaking his head.

"That was just a warning to Neville to stay away."

"A warning?" Harry exclaimed incredulously. "Neville had a fractured skull. That's pretty serious, Dean."

"It could have been a lot worse," he replied after a moment's hesitation.

"What the bloody hell is wrong with you Gryffindors?" Harry asked, his frustration bubbling over. "Ever since the start of term, I've been blamed for a murder, and now my entire House is being treated just as bad. Why the hell is the 'noble' House picking on younger Slytherins and cursing us while our backs are turned?"

Dean began to shuffle uncomfortably, looking unnerved by the venom within Harry's rant.

"Um, well, there's some things I can't say."

"You know what, Dean?" Harry asked, having reached his limit. "Fuck this. I've had enough of being jerked around by your House."

Red seeping into his vision, Harry turned, his feet kicking up straw, and stormed towards the owlery exit.

"Fine!" Dean yelled as his fingers curled around the handle. For a moment, Harry considered walking out anyway, but reason stilled his hand.

"Are you done wasting my time?" Harry asked without turning around.

"Yeah, yeah," Dean assured. "It's...Harry, you can't tell anyone about this."

"If people are in danger," Harry replied, turning around, "they have a right to know."

Dean violently shook his head.

"You really don't understand what a huge risk I'm taking right now. No one, no one can know we've met."

"If it's such a huge risk, why take it?" Harry challenged, injecting skepticism into the question.

"If no one speaks up, someone's going to end up getting killed this year!"

Harry froze at Dean's words. For a moment, the only sounds in the room were the howling of the wind outside and the low hoots of the owls. Was this situation far worse than he had imagined?

"Dean, what's going on in Gryffindor this year?"

"It started last year, after Percy's death. The Weasleys left the school, but some of the Gryffindors, Seamus and McLaggen

included knew about the problems you and Percy had. They didn't think Dumbledore's explanation made sense, and thought maybe you had something to do with it, and started spreading the rumor around Gryffindor."

For a short moment, Harry wondered why Dumbledore just hadn't told everyone that Voldemort had returned. Would that have prevented this entire situation?

"Most people didn't believe it," Dean continued, "but it put the thought in their heads."

"Wait," Harry implored, holding out a hand to stop Dean. "So it wasn't Ron that started the rumors?"

Dean shook his head.

"Not at first, anyway, but aboard the Hogwarts Express at the beginning of term, Ron started telling everyone that you did kill Percy. He even told a lot of the first years. First night of term, he gathered all the second-years into our room, except for Hermione and Neville. For hours he talked, speaking of how you had killed his brother, and planned to kill more Gryffindors with your Dark magic. As the year went on, he starting bringing first-years and a few third-years into our room, and for hours he'd talk about how evil you and the rest of the Slytherins were, and how as Gryffindors, they had to stop it."

Harry was shocked into silence. From day one, Ron had been plotting against him. It was almost like...

"He's bloody brainwashing them," he whispered.

"He is," Dean agreed. "Percy's death...it changed Ron, made him into a different person. People listen when he talks now, and believe him without question. I bet a third of our House is convinced you're taking Voldemort's place. All of the attacks against Slytherins, they're all planned by him. He's teaching them how to attack and not get caught, how to clear their wands so spells won't show up. Harry...it – it's almost like he's building an army."

"Why?" Harry exclaimed, dumbfounded by the lengths Ron had went to. "I didn't kill his brother!"

"At first, no one thought you did, but after hearing Ron talk about it day and night...especially the bit about you being the new Dark Lord...people started to believe it."

"Why not you, then?" Harry asked, curious.

Despite the night chill, Dean wiped his hand across his brow, wiping off sweat.

"I know a lot about blind hate, Harry," Dean explained quietly. "From the purebloods that don't think I should be here, to being..."

He trailed off, shaking his head.

"It's easy to hate someone for no reason. That's just what Ron's doing, and it's wrong."

So it did all come from Ron. Everything.

"I've tried to reason with him...but it hasn't worked."

"It won't," Dean replied, wearing a grim expression.

"Did...did his brother's death drive Ron insane?"

Dean began to reply, before hesitating for a moment.

"I – I think so, it's the only thing that makes sense, but..."

Harry fully understood the Gryffindor's reticence. It was quite a leap to call someone completely insane...but how else could it be described? Last year, Ron had been a decent enough bloke, and to Harry's knowledge, the only major change that had occurred had been Percy's murder.

"Something bad is about to happen," Dean said, breaking the silence, "and I want to stop it."

"What?"

"For the past two months, Ron has been brewing Polyjuice Potion in our room."

"Why?" Harry asked, well aware of its properties.

"They...they want to break into the Slytherin dorms."

"Shite," Harry swore quietly, running his hands through his hair. He thought Wealsey was just trying to fight dirty by grabbing his hair.

"Ron says we're going to go in disguise and find out the truth about Percy."

"You don't believe that, do you?"

The large black boy shook his head.

"I don't, but I still have a really, really bad feeling about it. I'm scared of what Ron really has planned."

It just didn't make sense. The only one in Slytherin that knew the complete truth was him, and Ron had to know that. How did using Polyjuice help him at all?

"How much has Ron told you about it?"

"It's going to be on a Friday night, when you guys are usually in the library. He's going to have someone lock the library door, and then go down to the Slytherin dorms. Besides that...he didn't say anything else."

Harry nodded. That part was probably true. However, what Ron actually planned to do once he arrived down in the Slytherin dorms...he hadn't the faintest.

"He's not going to be able to hide that it's finished," Harry said, thinking furiously. "What kind of a warning can you give us? I only need to know which day."

"I don't know," Dean said with a pained expression. "Ron can't know I helped you."

"I know. Okay, if it's going to be on a Friday, can you give me some sort of sign in Potions?"

Dean closed his eyes for a moment, thinking.

"On the day it happens, I'll drop my flask of potion on the way to Snape's desk. I'm sorry, but that's all I can do."

"That's perfect," Harry said. "I think we can stop Ron easily, I just need to know what day it is."

"I hope you do. Whatever Ron has planned...it isn't just about you anymore. If he has the chance to hurt a lot of Slytherins...he's going to take it."

"I'm not going to let that happen," Harry firmly spoke.

"Good," Dean replied, beginning to shuffle his feet. "Look, uh, I need to be getting back to my dorm. They'll notice if I'm gone for too long."

Harry nodded in understanding. Discretion was important in this situation.

"I really appreciate the warning," Harry thanked, stretching out his hand. Dean shook his hand once, shaking his head.

"I had to do something," the boy said with a shrug. "Just don't make me regret it."

"I won't," Harry assured, which seemed to satisfy Dean. With a nod, the large boy made his way down from the Owlery, leaving Harry to himself.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Settled against the rough stone, Harry rested upon his elbows, looking out into the night. Aside from giving Dean a slight head start, he had some thinking to do.

Despite the advantage that Dean had given him, he still had to be very careful. If Ron had ever found out he had been talking to a Slytherin...well, it probably was going to be far worse than what had happened to Neville.

Dean had come to him; he had to take every precaution to protect the Gryffindor.

Sighing, Harry pushed himself off the windowsill, giving one final glance to the gleaming stars above. He made his way slowly down the stairs leading from the Owlery, stopping at the bottom.

"You guys can come out now."

With a shuffle of fabric, he saw Tracey and Millicent's disembodied heads materialize from an empty alcove to the right of the stairs.

"Finally," Tracey said grumpily, her blonde hair badly fringed after four hours beneath the invisibility cloak. Millicent looked even worse, her dark, lank hair in tangles.

"Thanks for helping me out with this," Harry said, biting his tongue to keep from laughing at the state of his friends' hair.

"It might feel a bit more sincere if you weren't fucking laughing at us," Tracey said with a sniff. Unable to keep up the pretext anymore, Harry began to chuckle to himself.

"Don't worry about it," Millicent said with a slight smile. "Harry's going to make it up to us at Christmas, isn't he?"

Harry winced theatrically as they began to walk down the main staircase.

"What did you two have in mind?"

"I've heard great things about the Nimbus Two Thousand One," Millicent replied with an innocent smile.

"Did you hear that?" Harry asked Tracey, shaking his head sadly. "Not even thirteen, and she wants to drain my vaults."

She waved her hand dismissively.

"That's nothing. I want-"

"...rip...tear...kill..."

"Be quiet!" Harry hissed, the good cheer instantly departing his voice.

"What's wrong?" Tracey whispered, her eyes wide at Harry's sudden change in demeanor.

"Don't you hear that?" Harry asked, looking at her in disbelief.

"Hear what?"

"...so hungry...for so long..."

"That!" Harry exclaimed, bounding down the stairs two at a time. It was definitely the same voice he heard the night Filch died. Was there a killer here at Hogwarts?

"We don't hear anything!" Millicent yelled from behind him, her heavy footsteps thudding on the marble stairs.

How could they not hear it?

Shaking his head, Harry jumped the last five stairs, landing heavily upon the second floor landing. Was this where it had come from?

"...kill...time to kill..."

"They're in the second floor corridor," Harry yelled, making a beeline down one of the hallways. He wasn't going to let anyone else die!

"Who is?" Tracey asked, right behind him. "We don't hear anything!"

"I'm telling you, I hear it! It's the same voice I heard the night Filch died!"

"...I smell blood...I smell blood!"

"It's close by!" Harry yelled, willing himself to go faster. He had to get there first!

He slowed slightly to turn the corner, before skidding to a stop.

From beneath a closed door on the right side of the hall, water was rushing out. The flow had created a miniature pond in the center of the hallway, a few inches deep. Being pulled gently by the slight current, a yellow and black tie floated lazily in the current. Its owner,

Ernie Macmillan, was lying in the center of the water, face-up, glassy, unseeing eyes gazing towards the ceiling.

Opposite the body, written in bright red letters a foot high, was a message:

THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS HAS BEEN OPENED. ENEMIES OF THE HEIR, BEWARE.

"Ohmygod," Tracey whispered from behind him, her hands over her mouth.

"Is he..." Millicent trailed off, not wanting to finish the sentence, as if saying it would make it true.

Before Harry could answer, splashing sounds from further down the hall stole his attention. Without thinking, Harry withdrew his wand, in time to see Ron Weasley turn the corner.

The redhead froze in his tracks, surveying the scene for a brief moment, his roving eyes finally coming to rest upon Harry.

"You!"

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Author Notes:

My apologies for the delay, this chapter was an absolute pain. Most of it's been finished for a month, I was just stuck on the Quidditch scene. It began to break while watching Italy face New Zealand. Sadly, Italy didn't lose, but at least it planted the seeds that helped me finish off the chapter.

My schedule may become a bit light over the next few weeks, so I might be able to resume a normal posting schedule. At the very least, I remain hopeful.

Any comments, suggestions or criticisms would be deeply appreciated. Even a quick "I liked it," or, "it sucked" will suffice. I'll make an effort to answer every review I get. Thanks to all that have reviewed, breaching the four-hundred review mark was

tremendously helpful in getting me to stop playing Dead Space and work on this chapter.

Thanks to my Scarysisntit, mira mirth and Ellisande for their help in the planning process.

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Twenty-First Movement: Serpentine Admonition

November 8, 1992

Water soaking through his robes, Harry splashed through the puddle of water, praying that Ernie Macmillan was still alive. He kneeled in front of the fallen Hufflepuff, ignoring the cold water and placed his ear to the boy's mouth.

At full speed, Ron Weasley slammed into him with a charging tackle, throwing both of them backwards. Splashing wildly, Ron quickly won the advantage, pinning Harry to the ground.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Harry screamed in disbelief.

"I'm not going to let you hurt anyone else," Ron replied grimly, using his right arm to press Harry against the flooded floor. With his left, he reached into his robes. As he began to withdraw his wand, Millicent grabbed his soggy robes with both hands. With a grunt, she pulled backwards roughly, snapping Ron's head forward. Partially standing, Ron went to turn, but Millicent leaned back and swung Ron by his robes, flinging him into the wall.

The Weasley boy bounced off the wall hard, throwing up a wave of water as he fell to his knees. Shaking his head slightly, he gazed at Millicent, hatred burning in his eyes.

"You're fucking dead, Bulstrode," Ron whispered, before charging towards Millicent.

"Expelliarmus!"

Ron's eyes only had time to widen before the crimson spell struck him in his side. He was blown sideways, landing awkwardly upon Ernie's stiff body.

Wincing, Harry turned to see Tracey swiftly lower herself, plucking Ron's wand from the water. His ears red, rage contorting his features, Weasley jumped to his feet.

"Give me my fucking wand back, you mudblood bitch!"

Her blue eyes hardening to chips of ice, Tracey raised her wand.

"Stupefy!"

Her crimson spell struck swiftly, felling Ron, who fell limply into the pooled water with a large splash. Mumbling a quick, distracted thanks, Harry moved his attention towards Millicent.

"Get Dumbledore," he implored. She answered with a nod, turning and running down the hallway, her sodden robes flopping behind her. Without pause, Harry kneeled again at Ernie's still form. Hoping that they weren't too late, he placed an ear against the boy's mouth, hoping to feel Ernie's exhalations.

There were none.

"Is...is he gone?" Tracey asked softly.

Harry nodded sadly, relaxing back upon his heels.

"There's nothing we can do."

Tracey shook her head once, her face set in determination. Rushing to Ernie's other side she fell to her knees, placing her hands upon the departed boy's chest.

"We have to try CPR," she snapped, pressing her palms into Ernie's pale chest. To her surprise, his chest cavity was unyielding, as if were made of stone.

"What's wrong with him?" she asked, her rage leaking away, leaving behind only hopelessness.

Without answer, Harry rose to his feet, holding his hands out to her. She wove him off, shaking slightly as she regained her footing.

"What – what happened to him? It's...like he's made of stone."

"I don't know," Harry replied, staring down at the fallen Hufflepuff.

"Was this what...well, uh, what Filch looked like?" Tracey asked hesitantly.

"I'm not sure," Harry replied, keeping his thoughts to himself. Truthfully, their postures on the ground were strikingly similar, but he was no expert.

Silence followed his statement. Studying the body, Harry began to wonder if Filch's death had truly been a mere heart-attack. Ernie had been his age, probably just as healthy, too. Was there a killer here at Hogwarts?

"How do you keep doing this?" Tracey asked suddenly, her voice grave.

There was no mistaking what she referred to.

"You have to keep moving," Harry answered, "so it never gets the chance to catch up with you."

"What do you mean?" she asked, glancing down towards Ernie's still form.

"You have to keep going," he replied, giving a nod Ron, who still lay in the shallow water, unconscious. "Dumbledore can't see Ron here, like this."

"He started it though."

Harry shook his head.

"Doesn't matter. Fighting just a day after the school meetings? He's going to be forced to come down hard upon both of our Houses."

Moving towards Ron, Harry grabbed one of his legs, motioning for Tracey to grab the other.

"This fucking twit has caused us a lot of trouble this year," she remarked, a look of disgust upon her face as she grasped Weasley's other leg. Roughly, they dragged his limp body towards the nearest door, beneath which water continued to seep. Awkwardly holding the door open, Harry took a perverse sort of enjoyment of seeing Ron's head bounce off the floor.

Beyond the door was one of the gloomiest bathrooms he had ever seen, scantily lit by sputtering candles upon the wall. Chipped stone

sinks fitted with copper fixtures lined the near wall. Crossing the cracked marble floor, dragging Ron through several inches of water, they made their way over to the worn wooden cubicles on the opposite side.

"I've never seen this bathroom before."

Letting down Ron's leg, which fell into the water with a splash, she shrugged.

"It's usually haunted by this annoying ghost who cries a lot, and floods the bathroom whenever she's feeling vindictive."

"Someone must have pissed her off earlier then," Harry commented.

"I guess," she said dismissively. "What do you want to do with Ron?"

"Go lift up the seat," Harry said, motioning towards the stall door. As she did so, he took a moment to be grateful that the ghost didn't appear to be around. Bad as this situation was, it would be even worse with witnesses.

Dragging Ron forward, they dropped him onto the cracked, porcelain throne. He flopped into it, sinking to his mid-section in the bowl. His legs stuck out straight, while his head lolled against the tank. Surveying the youngest Weasley male, Harry was helpless to stop his chuckle, despite the gravity of the situation. Tracey quickly joined him as they made their way out.

Her laughter, however, died immediately upon exiting the bathroom, Ernie's body cruelly bringing her back to reality.

"How long will the stunner last?" she asked grimly. Harry began to answer, but heavy footfalls drew his attention. Turning down the corridor, he saw Millicent leading Dumbledore, McGonagall and Snape.

"I...ran...as...fast...as...I...could," Millicent assured, pulling in deep breaths of air. Without even looking at the students, Dumbledore swept towards Ernie's side, kneeling in front of him. His long, crooked nose an inch from the Hufflepuff's still form, the Headmaster began to poke and prod in close examination.

McGonagall merely watched from Dumbledore's side, a deep sadness in her eyes.

Professor Snape hung back, a grim expression upon his face. As Harry went to approach him, the Potions Master shook his head a single time.

"Not now, Potter."

Turning his attention back towards the Headmaster, he saw the wizard muttering strange words and tapping the boy with his wand, all to no avail.

What was the point, anyway? Ernie was dead. It wasn't like Dumbledore was going to be able to change that.

Blowing out a frustrated breath, Harry went over to Millicent, and placed a hand on her large shoulder.

"How're you doing?"

"Fine," she replied, her breath still ragged. "We'll see once I get my breath back."

Nodding, Harry watched as Dumbledore finally stood.

"He's not dead," the Headmaster said softly.

"What?" Harry exclaimed, incredulously.

Snape gave him a sharp glare, but Harry ignored it. How could it be true?

"He's been petrified," Dumbledore answered to his unasked question, "but how, I cannot say..."

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Professor Snape, his expression grim, his mouth thinned to a single vertical line, led the three Slytherins back towards the dormitories. Trailing slightly behind Snape's trailing cloak, his two friends sent questioning looks as they struggled to match the gait of the Potions Master.

There was no mistaking their unasked question.

When questioned by Dumbledore, Harry had opted to lie. No, he had not seen or heard anything unusual. Certainly not the truth, but it was all he was willing to part with. Simply put, Harry did not trust Dumbledore enough. Hearing voices that no one else could? People had been committed for less than that. How long would it take for the Ministry to try something like that if it ever got out that he heard voices? No, he had made the right choice.

For now, anyway.

"Professor, where are we-" Tracey began, before she was ruthlessly cut off.

"Silence," Snape demanded as they took a right, taking them off the path which led deeper into the dungeons, where the Slytherin dormitories were located. Unease began to creep into Harry's mind as he was led into the Potions classroom.

With a casual wave of his wand, Snape summoned three chairs from the desks.

"Sit," he ordered, his voice cold. Exchanging nervous glances with his friends, Harry did as told.

"Doubtless, you three were in the wrong place at the wrong time," Snape began, "but the circumstances invite their share of suspicion. What were you three doing in the upstairs corridor?"

"We were going to the owlery, sir" Harry quickly answered, before they could have the chance to cross their stories.

"Were you now?" Snape asked, doubt evident in his voice. "In that case, Miss Bulstrode, who was the letter addressed to?"

"Uh, I'm not sure," she answered shakily. "After the Quidditch match, we thought...maybe Harry shouldn't walk around by himself. Uh, sir"

"I see," Snape said with a sneer, before turning to Tracey. "If that is the case, what were you doing that far down the second-floor corridor, Miss Davis? That is nowhere near the main staircase."

"We were taking a short-cut, sir" replied Tracey, all while keeping a straight face.

"Do you take me for an idiot, Miss Davis?" asked Snape with a sneer.

"No sir, I-"

"Clearly you must, if you insist of feeding me these poorly conceived lies. You three are obviously hiding something, and your denials only bring further mistrust to our House. So I shall ask you again, and for the last time: What are you hiding?"

Playing a hunch, Harry took a deep breath.

"We weren't the only ones there."

Snape's eyes glittered with impatience.

"Obviously. Your sodden clothes alone said as much. Consider yourself fortunate that the Headmaster did not question you further."

Cringing, Harry went on to describe Ron's appearance, as well as their subsequent disposal of his stunned body. Oddly, the Potions Master's disposition seemed to improve as Harry continued his story.

"While I do not condone deceiving the Headmaster," Snape said slowly, "for once, you actually showed some forethought, something I once believed impossible. You were correct to assume that Dumbledore would have been forced to hand out some sort of punishment. However, as long as Weasley awakes with no ill effects, I see no reason to pursue this matter any further."

"Thank you, sir," Harry said respectfully.

Snape waved his hand dismissively.

"Do not thank me, Potter. I will not allow your actions to affect the rest of my House. Now, get out of my sight. I will be along shortly, and I expect you three to be in the Common Room when I arrive. Is that clear?"

"Yes sir," they answered in unison. Turning, they fled from the Potions classroom, Harry in the rear.

"Potter," Snape's voice rang out, stopping him in his tracks. "If you lie to me again, I will have you expelled. Do you understand?"

"Yes sir," answered Harry, before fleeing the classroom, thoughts of expulsion in his mind.

There was no way in hell he was telling Snape he heard voices no one else did.

None.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

When they had hidden Ron in Myrtle's bathroom, Harry had a good idea that there would be some sort of reprisal.

He just didn't expect it from the entire school.

"There he is!"

"Why doesn't Dumbledore kick him out?"

"Who are you going after next, Potter?"

Alternating between anger and fear, the voices came from all sides as he walked towards the History of Magic classroom. Ignoring the urge to curse them all, Harry blocked it all out, walking as if he were in a vacuum. To acknowledge one of them would be to acknowledge them all.

"Eek!" a yellow-tied girl screeched as he passed, fear in her wide hazel eyes. Mindlessly, she pushed into a cove of students, hiding from view.

"Fucking pathetic," Tracey spat, not bothering to lower her voice. Though she was a distant second, she was on the receiving end on her fair share of venomous glares.

"Way to keep your head down," Millicent remarked dryly.

"It's not my problem they're all idiots," she hotly retorted as they approached the History of Magic classroom.

Ever since their Defense class, where Lockhart had boldly declared he was about to catch the culprit, Tracey and Millicent had been at each other's throats. Trying to once again block out their sniping, he entered the History of Magic classroom, and sat at the front.

"I hope this is worth it," Tracey remarked.

Harry shrugged.

"If anyone would know anything about the Chamber of Secrets, it would be Binns."

"I don't know," Millicent disagreed, "that would mean Binns would actually know something useful."

"And interesting," Tracey added with a grin, their spat temporarily forgotten.

For the first time in a while, they looked forward to the beginning of class. Not only because they may be close to finding out what the Chamber of Secrets was, but as an escape from the rest of the school. The Slytherin History of Magic class had a mere six students in it.

Blaise, Daphne and Nott followed shortly after. While Theodore went to go sit by himself, the other two joined Harry and company.

"To what do we owe the pleasure?" Daphne asked, a smile betraying her haughty words.

"We couldn't pass up the chance that History of Magic might actually be interesting," Harry replied.

"Not a very good chance though," Blaise added, shaking his head sadly. "The last time the Chamber was opened, everything about it was hushed up. Even if Binns knew anything, I don't think he'd tell us."

"Wait, it's been opened before?" Harry asked, leaning forward.

"Yeah, about fifty years ago," Daphne answered. "Mother didn't know a lot about it, but she said the last time it was opened, someone died."

"Who?"

Daphne shrugged, her dark hair bouncing lightly.

"Not sure. My parents graduated at the same time as yours did. All they've heard is rumors."

No one else seemed to be better informed. Daphne thought that someone might have been sent to Azkaban fifty years ago, but wasn't exactly sure.

In short order, shriveled and wrinkled Professor Binns floated through the blackboard. Without fanfare, or acknowledging the students in any fashion, Binns opened his notes and began to read in his trademark drone.

Before the class could slip into its normal stupor, Harry raised his hand high, partially lifting him off the seat. Binns, thrown off course by the possibility of interaction with his class, blinked owlishly.

"Mister – er...?"

"Potter," he quickly responded. "You've heard about what happened Sunday, right?"

"Well...you see...I've been awfully busy..."

A few of the students broke out into chuckles at Binns' clear confusion. Fighting his own smile, Harry continued.

"Well, it's not that important...but we were wondering if you could tell us anything about the Chamber of Secrets."

"My subject is History of Magic," he replied in his dry, wheezy voice. "I deal with facts, Mister Potter, not myths or legends. Now-"

"But don't all legends come from fact?" Tracey asked, cutting the transparent professor off.

Professor Binns looked flabbergasted to have been cut off, but didn't appear to know how to handle it. Bewilderment crossing his pale features, Binns opted to answer.

"Well, one could argue that point, I suppose," he said doubtfully. "However, the legend of which you speak is so sensational, so ludicrous that – uh, er..."

His students leaning forward, hanging on his every word, Binns was thrown even further off. Coughing into his hand, he began. Before rapt attention, he went through the entire legend of the Chamber of Secrets, starting with the founding of Hogwarts all the way to Slytherin's final act. Upon conclusion, Tracey spoke up again.

"What do you mean by 'horror' within the Chamber?"

"Some sort of monster, which the Heir of Slytherin alone can control. As I said before, pure rubbish. I tell you, the thing does not exist. There is no Chamber, and there is no monster."

"Well, if only the Heir of Slytherin can open it, of course no one else would be able to find it," Tracey remarked edgily.

Not caring for her tone, Binns drew himself up to his full, diminutive height.

"That will do," he said sharply. "It is a myth! It does not exist! There is not a shred of evidence that Slytherin built so much as a secret broom cupboard! I regret telling you such a foolish story. We will return, if you please, to history, to solid, believable, verifiable fact!"

The force of his words was slightly diminished by his status as a ghost, prompting Harry to challenge the Professor.

"What about the student that died fifty years ago, when the Chamber was last opened?" Harry asked.

"Her death was an unfortunate accident," Binns said, "and had nothing to do with the Chamber, and everything to do with an irresponsible wizard."

"Who's death?"

Binns shook his head, looking embarrassed for a moment.

"I've already let this class stray far enough for one day. I, Mister Potter, plan to once again delve into the pages of history. Of fact! You can either join me, or you can leave. The choice is yours."

Immediately, Binns began to read from his notes in a bitter drone, as if more determined than ever to put his students to sleep. Despite that, Harry felt the class had been at least a moderate success.

If Binns knew what had happened fifty years ago, then the events hadn't been completely covered up. Daphne had certainly been right, someone had died, though their identity still remained a mystery.

More than anything, however, Harry's thoughts were drawn towards the monster.

What creature had the ability to petrify people?

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

As the weeks began to accumulate, and winter break loomed closer, a sense of normalcy began to return to Hogwarts' students. The fact that a second-year student had been petrified certainly preyed at the back of people's minds, but with classes, friends and Quidditch occupying the forefront it was possible to move on.

Besides, the mandrakes would mature in the summer, and it would be as if it never occurred. With that knowledge safe in hand, people began to forget.

That majority, however, did not include Harry.

Months ago, he had been given the opportunity to say something about Filch, to maybe make a difference, but had chosen to take the easier route, and do nothing. Then, he had thought Filch's ramblings incoherent, nonsense. Now, he couldn't help but think that Filch had known what was going to happen, and had been silenced because of it.

Was it due to his inaction that Ernie now lay petrified in the Infirmary? While they certainly had not gotten along, Harry almost felt like he owed it to the blond Hufflepuff to try to figure out what

was going on. The professors' investigations had turned up nothing, but Harry had one vital piece of information they didn't.

The whispers.

"Are we really sure that we want to find the thing that killed one person and petrified another?" Millicent asked in a low whisper.

"Definitely," Harry deadpanned without breaking his stride.

"Besides," Tracey reasoned, "no one can see us. Even if we find out who's causing it, that doesn't mean they have to find out who we are."

"We don't even know if it's a who! What if we find the monster from the Chamber of Secrets?"

"That same monster that doesn't exist?" Tracey asked, referncing their fruitless search through the library's section on magical creatures.

Millicent frowned, far from reassured, but said nothing else.

Silencing charms upon their feet, they continued to move through the dead halls of Hogwarts, beneath Harry's invisibility cloak. As of late, he found this state vastly preferable. During the small hours, there were no looks of fear, distrust. No students flattening themselves against the wall to let the 'Heir of Slytherin' pass by.

Walking the exact same route they had taken while chasing the whispers that led them to Ernie's petrified body, Harry strained his ears, but heard absolutely nothing.

As they arrived in the second-floor corridor, he felt both of the girls tense slightly. Harry imagined that the memory of finding Ernie was still fresh in their minds, as it was in his. The difference being, of course, that he was no stranger to death.

Rounding the corner, Harry thought he heard the light sound of a girl crying.

"Do you hear that?" Harry whispered.

Millicent sighed deeply.

"That's just Moaning Myrtle."

"Huh?"

"She's the one that floods the bathroom when she's angry," Tracey explained.

"Maybe she saw something that night, something that made her upset," Harry whispered excitedly, reaching towards the door handle.

Before he could reach it, Tracey put a hand upon his arm, stopping him with a shake of her head.

"Myrtle is really, really temperamental, and the smallest thing can set her off."

"She's really bad," Millicent added. "In fact, it would probably be better if you stayed here."

Tracey snorted.

"Probably."

"That bad?" Harry asked, raising his eyebrows slightly.

"Yup. She tried bothering me during first year. By the time I left that bathroom, water was already starting to go everywhere."

"Fair enough," Harry remarked with a shrug. "We'll be right out."

He slipped out from beneath the cloak's cover, closely followed by Millicent. They swiftly ducked into the bathroom, leaving Tracey behind.

The bathroom was just as glum before, though thankfully the floor was free of water. Motioning for Harry to stay near the door, Millicent strode towards the stall on the end.

"Myrtle, are you around?" she asked loudly.

After a moment's delay a transparent figure floated through the warped, peeling door. In life, Myrtle had been a squat, lank-haired young girl with a pimple-flecked face. Large, horn-rimmed glasses covered her eyes.

"This is a girl's bathroom," she said, narrowing her eyes suspiciously at Harry, "and you're not a girl."

"No, he's not," Millicent agreed, "but he did want to meet you."

"Oh, that's a good one!" the pale ghost howled. "My life was nothing but misery at this place, and everyone keeps trying to find me and ruin my death! No one wants to see me!"

"Well, I wanted to ask you something," Harry said, fighting the urge to roll his eyes. It appeared death had also frozen her emotional development as well.

"Fine! What'd you want to know?" the ghost demanded sourly.

"Three weeks ago, they found a boy petrified in the hall. Did you see anything strange that night?"

Immediately, Myrtle's eyes began to fill with tears.

"Sure, ask the girl who doesn't know what date it is! When you're dead, the days don't really matter much, do they?"

"It was the same night the entire bathroom was flooded," Millicent said quickly. "Was someone mean to you, Myrtle?"

"People are always mean to me," the ghost whined, "but that night was even worse. Here I was – just thinking about how awful death is, when a red-headed boy came in here."

Harry and Millicent both raised their eyebrows, but wisely chose not to interrupt.

Ron?

"I started to tell him off, but he threw a book through my head!"

"Why would he do that?" Harry asked sympathetically.

"Oh, let's throw book at Myrtle, she can't feel it!" the ghost bitterly spat. "Ten points if you get it through her stomach! Fifty points through her head! What a lovely game, don't you think? You know, those Gryffindors are sometimes just as bad as...well, you're certainly nice," she finished, her voice softening.

Millicent coughed loudly, desperately trying to hide a laugh.

"Uh, thanks," Harry awkwardly replied, close to laughter himself. "It is getting kind of late, so we really should be heading off."

"Oh... alright," said Myrtle glumly. Without further comment, she floated back to her favorite stall, disappearing from sight. The apparition out of sight, Millicent began to rock back and forth, tears of laughter in her eyes.

"Quiet," Harry mouthed as they walked out of the bathroom. Incapable of reply, Millicent merely nodded, her eyes shining with mirth. Throwing the door wide open, she stumbled into the hallway.

"What's wrong?" Tracey asked with bewilderment.

Leaning against the wall, Millicent finally found release, unleashing a deep, roaring laugh.

"Was it really that funny?" Harry asked, trying to hide his own smile.

"Of course it was," Millicent answers, wiping her forearm across her eyes. "Myrtle is sweet on our little Harry."

Tracey immediately joined her friend, Harry's glare not intimidating her in the least.

"So, Harry," Tracey asked between peals of laughter, "when are you going to pop the question?"

Trying to maintain his scowl, he failed miserably, and joined them, shaking his head. Bit-by-bit their giggles faded away, and they once again gathered beneath Harry's cloak, heading back towards the Slytherin dormitories.

"Did you learn anything useful?" Tracey whispered.

"Yeah, it's fifty points if you throw a book through Myrtle's head," Harry cheekily answered.

"Really, fifty points?" she asked, intrigued. "Think we could turn it into a House sport?"

"I don't know, I think Harry's new girlfriend might take offense to that," Millicent helpfully pointed out.

"Probably," Harry agreed, "but anyway, guess who pissed off Myrtle to make her flood the hallway the night we found Ernie."

"I don't know," Tracey quickly snapped impatiently. "Who?"

"Ron."

"Ron Weasley," she mouthed to herself, before falling silent for a moment. "So he had to know what was going to happen."

"Indeed."

"Wait, are we saying that Ron intentionally flooded the hall?" Millicent interjected, sounding unsure.

"Maybe," Harry replied. "I mean, how did he find us? Myrtle's bathroom isn't on the way to Gryffindor Tower."

"Wasn't he coming from the Infirmary?"

"Even if he was, there's much faster ways than going by her bathroom. He has to know about some of the short-cuts, right?"

"I don't know," Millicent said, sounding far from convinced. "Sure, maybe Ron flooded the hallway...but to help someone petrify Ernie? That's some really dark shite."

"I know," Harry conceded, "but why else would Ron go out of his way to upset Myrtle?"

The two girls were silent, unable to think of an alternate solution.

"This is really bad," Tracey said quietly. "Ron had no problem with Ernie. What if..."

"What if - what?" Millicent asked warily.

"What if it was just a test, and the rest of us are next?"

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Sweat rolled down his forehead, stinging his eyes. Blinking rapidly, Harry felt the hooks of desperation take hold. If he didn't do something very quickly, he was going to lose.

Throwing himself to the right, Harry rolled on the dust-covered floor, narrowly avoiding a bludgeoner. He quickly jumped up and banished a warped wooden chair at Regina Yaxley. With a smirk she flung a cutter, neatly bisecting the chair mid-air, both pieces flying harmlessly behind her. Jabbing his wand forward, Harry cast the next spell.

"Accio chair!"

Cursing, Regina jumped to the side, but a section of the chair caught her in the leg. The force of the blow cut out her legs, sending her crashing to the floor, landing hard upon her side.

"Are you okay?" Harry asked with a wince, lowering his wand.

Regina replied by bringing her wand up.

"Expelliarmus!"

Unprepared for the quick strike, he was helpless as the red spell blew him off his feet, ripping the wand from his hands. He hit the ground hard, his teeth clacking together painfully. Frustrated, Harry got to his feet, wincing as he did so.

"What's your problem?" he demanded, rubbing his stinging back.

Regina sneered at him disdainfully.

"The duel wasn't over."

"Bullshit! You were down!"

She snorted at his claim, blowing aside strands of her coppery hair.

"Wake the fuck up, Potter. A duel isn't over until one person is physically unable to continue.

"You landed really hard, I thought you were done."

Regina shook her head.

"Not good enough, Potter," she said with a sigh. "What if you had been dueling Weasley? Would he have stopped if you had fell down?"

"Probably not," Harry admitted. "I don't think he would even if I got knocked out."

"He wouldn't," she confirmed grimly. "That's why you can never stop, never show any mercy. It's something your enemies will never grant you."

Harry wasn't sure if he agreed with Regina's analysis, but nodded his head just the same. Apparently satisfied, she gave a sharp nod.

"However, that was a good tactic, one I haven't seen before. Where did you learn it?"

"I learned it from one of my guardians," Harry said with a shrug. Banishing then summoning seemed like a pretty basic tactic.

Regina raised her eyebrows, clearly impressed.

"Nicolas Flamel let you duel against him?"

"Yeah, but the styles you teach are really, really different."

"How does Nicolas train you?" she asked with unrestrained curiosity.

"He believes that it is better to know five spells perfectly than kinda know fifty spells.

Regina crossed her arms, nodding.

"That explains why you're so quick to use shields and other relatively weak spells."

"Until I faced you, they were good enough," Harry pointed out defensively.

"Perhaps," she conceded with a shrug. "Nicolas is training you to be a technical duelist."

"Um, is that a bad thing?"

"Definitely not," she assured, "as long as the teacher has patience. It prevents sloppy wandwork, and is the best way to train a child."

"It can't be that good, if I can't beat you," Harry muttered.

"Please," she replied with a roll of her eyes. "I'm a sodding fifth-year, and the best in my year. Nicolas is training you to be competitive against students your own age. I'm sure he didn't anticipate you having to compete against much older students. Besides, don't forget you almost beat four older students at once last year. That's pretty fucking impressive, Potter."

Harry felt his face grow hot, as blood began to fill his face.

"Thanks."

"However," she countered, "Flamel's teachings do leave a glaring hole in your offensive arsenal."

"What's that?"

Regina smirked at him.

"I'm going to assume that Flamel didn't really spend much time on the Dark Arts."

"Yeah, not really."

"Well, it's about time we fixed that."

"Uh, I don't think so," Harry replied, shaking his head.

Regina sighed deeply, and rubbed her temples.

"Potter, your offensive arsenal is limited, to say the least. You need to broaden your spell lexicon."

"There's plenty of other spells out there," he pointed out. "I don't want to use the Dark Arts."

"I don't care," Regina snapped back at him, beginning to lose her patience. "Flint sent you here to learn how to defend yourself, and he's not going to be happy if he finds out you didn't follow my instructions."

Harry crossed his arms.

"Flint isn't happy unless someone on the other team is on the ground, writhing in pain."

"What's the big deal, anyway?"

Harry thought for a moment, composing his words carefully.

"Nicolas said the Dark Arts is based upon sacrifice. When you use the Dark Arts, you're sacrificing a part of yourself. I...I just don't think it's worth it."

Regina looked at him incredulously.

"Did you ever consider that a renowned Light wizard might have a bias against the Dark Arts?"

"Probably," he admitted, "but look at what happened to Voldemort. Can you blame me for wanting to be careful?"

Regina flinched at the usage of his name, but recovered quickly, continuing as if nothing had happened.

"The Light always overestimates the corruption of the Dark Arts," she bitterly explained. "Using a Dark curse ever once in a while will not turn you evil."

"All Dark Lords had to start somewhere."

"Bloody hell, Potter!" Regina exclaimed, drawing her wand and slinging a purple curse at him. Harry tried to dodge, but the spell struck him in the arm. He immediately began to feel dizzy.

"Whatthehell?" he mumbled, trying to take a step forward. His foot landed limply upon the floor, supporting nothing, sending him tumbling to the floor. Harry tried to roll over, but could only get halfway, flopping like an overturned turtle upon his back.

"What's happening?" he slurred.

With a malicious, mocking laugh, Regina reached down and pulled Harry roughly to his feet. Still feeling uneasy, he drew his wand, backpedaling, prompting another mocking laugh.

"I guess you didn't like the Disorientation Curse, did you?"

"What the hell was that for?" Harry angrily demanded.

Regina grinned malevolently, ignoring his question.

"Imagine how useful that would be in a duel. You're not hurting the other person, only disrupting their sense of equilibrium, making it hard for your enemy to strike back."

Shaking his head, the effects began to fade further, making him almost feel normal again.

"That wasn't much different from being Confused," Harry grudgingly admitted.

"It isn't," she agreed. "Some would even say it's not as powerful, as its effects do not last long."

"What's the counter-curse?"

"It's Dark Magic, Potter. There isn't one."

At her words, Harry fell silent. He understood that there was a definite bias against the Dark Magic by his guardians, as they had both spoken of the corrupting nature of the Dark Arts. Still...the

effects of the disorientation were minor, and faded quickly. Could there be more minor curses like that, that lacked the corruption so feared by the Flamels?

"What do you say?" Regina asked, tapping her right boot against the ground impatiently.

"With the bad reputation I have, not only with the rest of the school, but with the Prophet, would it really be a good idea to start using the Dark Arts?" Harry asked hesitantly.

"Bloody hell, Potter," Regina spat. "You're got more raw talent and smarts than anyone I've ever seen at this school, you're a fucking Slytherin, and you're going to let yourself be limited?"

With a start, Harry realized she wasn't just training him as a favor to Flint. Was this actually a matter of House pride? And what would she be willing to do to continue his training?

Like a revelation, it dawned upon him that she could be very helpful to a problem that he had been unable to solve for the past few weeks. Taking a deep breath, he composed his reply.

"I'll start to learn minor Dark curses, if you'll help me out with a problem."

With a devious grin, her eyes roamed up and down his body.

"You're a little young for me, Potter."

Caught off guard by her response, he sputtered for a moment.

"N-n-no, I didn't mean anything like that!"

"Relax, Potter," she said with a grin. "What do you want?"

His confidence returning, Harry began to explain.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

December 4, 1992

Unsurprisingly, Harry and Tracey were the first ones to finish their itching solution. He carefully transferred two ladles of the purple potion into two glass flasks, each adorned with their respective names.

"Does this ever get boring to you?" Tracey asked, staring into the cauldron.

"Not really," Harry replied with a shrug.

"But haven't you done all of these before?"

"Yeah, but its good practice," he answered, scooping up the two flasks. He quickly dropped them off on Snape's desk, before returning to his seat.

"You could probably do all of these in your sleep," she grumbled.

"Of course I could," he said with a grin, "I'm just trying to get faster."

"Trying to set a time record on your Potions O.W.L., Potter?" Blaise asked, looking up from his own steaming cauldron.

"Sure, why not?"

"I don't believe this," Daphne remarked, shaking her head. "You're already done, and we're barely halfway. Are you sure you're not taking any short-cuts?"

"Pretty sure. Millie and Nott are almost done, maybe you two are just slow?"

At Tracey's chuckle, Daphne turned back towards her partner.

"Are you hearing this, Blaise?"

The dark-skinned, haughty boy let out a sly grin.

"What can we do? If we try to fight back, Potter might decide to wake up the monster in the Chamber."

Harry let out a somewhat forced laugh. He knew Blaise was joking, but it seemed a good deal of the school really did believe that Harry had let loose the monster.

Even if no one had any real idea what kind of creature could petrify someone.

Harry included.

"Only two more weeks, eh Harry?" Millicent asked, taking a seat next to him.

A genuine smile found its way onto Harry's face as he closed his weary eyes.

"I can't wait."

"Yeah," Millicent agreed, motioning towards the opposite side of the room. "It'll be nice to get away from them for a few weeks."

Harry nodded in complete agreement. The constant barbs, the general dislike, the fear, it was all starting to become too much. More than anything, he just needed a few weeks away from Hogwarts, to recharge mentally.

The sound of shattering glass awoke him from his thoughts. Looking towards the front of the classroom, Harry saw a broken flask upon the ground, sitting in a puddle of purple potion. Standing above it was Dean Thomas, who looked like he just dropped a priceless artifact.

"Two points from Gryffindor for clumsiness," Snape said carelessly, drawing a groan from his Housemates.

There was more, but Harry didn't hear it. Turning to his right, he saw his own thought in both Tracey and Millicent's eyes:

Tonight was the night.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X-X

As there would be any other Friday night, papers and books were spread over their table in the corner of the library. However, that is where the similarities ended.

Where normally there would be lively chatter and laughter, there was only tense silence, not unlike that of a funeral. Harry, Millicent and Neville had each tried to bring a sense of normalcy to the proceedings, but it had proved a futile effort. It seemed that when waiting for something to happen, the well of laughter ran dry.

"Do you think this is really going to work?" Neville whispered.

"Definitely," Harry answered, projecting confidence he certainly didn't feel.

"I still think we should have gone to Dumbledore," Hermione added, biting her bottom lip slightly.

"No way," Harry replied, shaking his head. "That would be like hanging a sign around Dean's neck that said 'traitor'. I can't let that happen, after he risked so much to help us."

"What is it with you?" she demanded, leaning back in her chair, crossing her arms. "Every time we could use the Headmaster's help, you do anything you can to avoid using it."

"She's got a point, Harry," Millicent added.

"Look, it doesn't matter," Harry snapped, a bit more harshly than he had intended. "I just don't think that we have to involve him. We can handle this."

There was certainly more to it, but his friends had been kept in the dark regarding the revelations of the summer.

"Fine," she said haughtily, throwing her nose in the air, "but if this doesn't work, I'm going straight to the Headmaster."

While his first impulse was to refuse, he quickly squashed it. If this failed, they'd have little choice in the matter. Besides, was he being stupid about his mistrust of Dumbledore? After all, he hadn't actually done anything to wrong him in this world...

"Absolutely," Harry answered confidently, prompting a look of surprise upon his friend's features. "Look, she's right; we're almost in over our heads anyway."

"Oh, well – good," Hermione replied awkwardly, thrown off by his sudden change of heart.

"We go to Dumbledore, Ron might say what happened the night we found Ernie," Tracey said pointedly, glaring at Hermione.

"He probably already knows," Millicent pointed out. "I mean, he's already told half the school, it probably already got back to Dumbledore."

Tracey scowled, and began to open her mouth, but the creak off the library door froze her.

"Act normal," Harry hissed, turning back to his Charms book. The rest of his friends quickly followed suit, poring over books and papers.

Though they only kept the charade up for a minute, it seemed like an eternity for Harry. Finally, hearing the door shut again, he let out a deep breath.

"Who was it?" he asked Tracey and Neville, the only two with a good view of the door.

"Lavender," Tracey spat distastefully. "I guess Weasley's saving the Polyjuice for the talented ones."

Millicent let out a snort of laughter.

"Yeah, definitely. We should just take her now."

"No," Harry said forcefully, shaking his head. "We're not just preventing her from locking us in."

"What do you mean?" Hermione demanded, her eyes narrowing. "What's going on here?"

"Wake up, Hermione," Tracey said derisively. "Weasley isn't going to break into the Slytherin dorms if he doesn't know for sure that we're locked in the library."

Hermione leaned forward, her eyes ablaze with anger.

"I did not agree to this! If you hurt-"

The library door slammed shut, cutting her off mid-sentence. The five students froze in anticipation. Was this the signal?

Harry and company jumped to their feet at the door opened and closed softly two more times. Books and papers forgotten, they rushed across the library floor, as discreetly as possible.

In the lead, Harry pushed through the door, revealing an empty hallway.

"Is it safe?" he asked as the rest of his friends poured forth from the library.

"Indeed it is," a female voice replied from the empty space to his right. Harry turned just in time to see the slim, coppery-haired form of Regina Yaxley take off his invisibility cloak, and toss it to him. In her right hand, she held up a length of rope.

"What did you find out?"

Regina smiled coldly.

"Weasley must not have had much faith in the Gryffindor," she said, motioning towards the rope. "She was just going to tie the handles together."

"What's the signal?"

Regina shook her head.

"There isn't one, Potter."

"Shite. Hermione, Neville, go back to your dorms."

Hermione didn't budge.

"Where's Lavender?" she asked Regina, coldly.

Withdrawing her wand, the older Slytherin snorted derisively, motioning towards a nearby bench. Sure enough, Lavender was upon it, her legs curled under her, as if she were asleep.

"The Gryffindor wasn't so brave, and spilled everything pretty quickly. The stunner will wear off in an hour, and she'll go back to her Common Room, thinking that the Bloody Baron turned invisible and is defending his Slytherins. Happy?"

Hermione didn't look convinced.

"Look, if I find-"

"Fuck off, Granger," Regina snarled. "We don't hurry, Weasley's going to beat us to the dorms. We have to leave. Now."

Without further comment, Harry turned from his friend, and began to race down the hall, keeping pace with Regina, Millicent and Tracey right behind him. They took the stairs three at a time, bringing them to the entrance hall.

"Shouldn't...there...have...been a signal?" Harry asked between breaths as they rushed towards the dungeon entrance.

Regina nodded.

"Yeah. This isn't good, Potter."

Pulling his wand from his robes, Harry pushed himself faster down the darkened hallways of the dungeon. Had Weasley changed the plan last-minute?

Turning the corner, skidding slightly on the flagstones, Harry saw the blank expanse of wall that hid the Slytherin dormitories.

Moving swiftly, Regina stopped in front of the wall.

"Harlequin," she said, breathing heavily.

The wall immediately slid aside, admitting them entrance. Without hesitation, Regina rushed through. Flint, sitting near the door with the rest of the Slytherin Quidditch team, looked up at her arrival.

"Bout fuckin' time," he said.

"Blow it out your arse," Regina replied coolly. "Any strange sightings?"

"Nothin'," he replied, shaking his head. "Now why don' ye get in tha fuckin' Seeker's dorm fore ye ruin my surprise?"

"What does he have in mind?" Harry whispered to Regina as they made their way towards his room, threading between the green hangings and chairs.

"Didn't ask," Regina replied with a shrug, "but if Flint thinks someone's trying to hurt his Seeker, it's probably not going to be too pleasant. Now run along, the big boys and girls are going to stand guard."

"Thanks."

"Don't worry about it. Just don't forget your end of the bargain."

Before he could reply, she had turned to join Flint in guarding the door. Sighing, he continued towards the back of the Common Room, towards his quarters.

"I almost wish I could see it," Tracey said regretfully. "It'd be great to see Flint go psycho on Weasley."

"Yeah it would," Harry agreed with a grin as they made their way into the second-year room. Nott, lying upon his bed, looked up briefly before returning to his book, apparently unconcerned with the unexpected guests.

"Well...what do we do now?" Millicent asked, sitting upon the edge of Harry's bed.

"I guess we wait," Harry said, shrugging. "I'm just glad that we got here before Weasley and the other Gryffindors did."

Tracey shook her head slowly, her expression glum.

"That's if they even show up."

"You weren't there," Harry replied, "Dean definitely wasn't lying to me."

"I'm not saying he was, but think about it: Weasley had no way of knowing we were actually in the library! Is he really going to risk coming down here if he doesn't know for sure?"

"She's right," Millicent added. "Why go to all the trouble of making the Polyjuice if you don't have a good plan?"

Searching his mind, Harry tried to find a counter-argument.

He was unsuccessful.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

"So where's ye fuckin' evil twins, Potter?" Flint asked between a yawn.

"I don't know," Harry answered wearily.

The Slytherin Common Room had almost completely emptied out by the stroke of midnight, leaving behind only a few students.

They had waited for nearly five hours, and had not seen any sign of intruders.

"Maybe they don't know the password," Derrick offered, "and are just waiting for us to let them in."

"Then let them in," replied Bole, grumpily. "I want to get some sleep tonight."

"Yeah, sorry Harry," Peter Yaxley said, turning towards him, "but this is bullshit. Their only chance of getting in was at the same time as another Slytherin, and that hasn't happened."

"No, I'm sorry," Harry redirected, shaking his head. "They obviously aren't coming tonight. This was a waste of time."

"Maybe not," Regina countered. "There aren't many Potions prodigies in Gryffindor. Maybe the Polyjuice just didn't work right."

"Maybe."

Internally, however, he doubted the statement. Things had been strange from the start. What if Dean had given him bad information? Or even worse, had been fooled?

Maybe Weasley's true plan had not yet revealed itself.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

"Maybe if you hit his book-bag with a cutter, the other Gryffindors would leave him alone," Millicent suggested.

"Or maybe they would start a riot if Harry pointed a wand at one of their own," Tracey pointed out.

Harry shook his head, no closer to a solution. In the weeks following the supposed attack, he hadn't been able to corner Dean, much less talk to him about what truly happened that Friday night.

"Is he avoiding you?"

"Yeah, but I expected that. The other Gryffindors expect him to hate me. I don't think they'd like us talking, and he knows that."

"Do you think he's just embarrassed?" Millicent suggested. "I mean, when he wanted to talk to you, he tried pretty hard."

"I don't know," Harry admitted, running a hand through his hair, front to back. "I still really think he was telling the truth. Something must have...changed after that, I guess."

"Well, term's almost over. You could try to corner him on the Hogwarts Express."

"Maybe," Harry replied with a shrug as they approached the corner. A large, ornate mirror with gold framing was set into the corner, giving a clear view of the other corridor.

In its polished depths, he saw two smaller boys bearing the silver and green crests of Slytherin, and a much larger boy standing over them. Large and gangly in form, with short-cropped, wiry brown hair, the other boy wore a crimson and gold tie.

"Is that McLaggen?" Millicent whispered, peering into the glass.

"Yeah," Harry answered wearily, "and again, he's messing with the first-years."

"Whatever it is, it's bad," Tracey said coldly, her eyes narrowing. "They look really scared."

"Would you like to show McLaggen why it's a bad idea of pick on little kids?"

"Indeed," she answered, withdrawing her wand from her robes. Picking up speed, she turned the corner and jabbed her wand forward.

"Expelliarmus!"

McLaggen turned just in time to see the crimson spell strike him in the chest. It forcefully wrenched the wand from his hand while simultaneously knocking him sideways. As he stumbled, Harry's eyes were drawn the space in front of the boys.

Writhing on the stone floor, in the dim torchlight, were two large serpents. Their flat heads weaved as they swayed, their eyes focused squarely upon the two boys, forked tongues flicking back and forth.

"Help us!" one of the boys yelled, tear tracks shining on his cheeks.

"What the hell is wrong with you, McLaggen?" Tracey raged.

"I thought all you Slytherins loved snakes," the Gryffindor sneered disdainfully.

"We'll get you out of this," Harry promised to the first-years, ignoring McLaggen.

"Do you think stunners work on snakes?" Millicent asked quietly from the corner of her mouth.

Harry shook his head.

"I don't know, but if we miss, they might get pissed and go after those two."

At his words, the snakes turned towards him. Twin sets of dark, beady eyes regarded him, as if watching him. Taking a step to his left, he discovered that they were following his every move.

"Do you see this?" Harry asked incredulously.

"They know that you're a Dark Wiz-"

"If you don't shut up," Tracey said coldly, cutting McLaggen off, "you're going to see exactly what sort of curses Harry's been teaching us."

Cormac scowled at her words, but stayed silent, instead opting to pluck his wand from the floor. Tracey was at the ready, but the Gryffindor wisely opted to keep his wand pointed downwards.

Favoring her with a quick smile of thanks, Harry turned his attention to the two boys.

"What're your names?" he asked calmly.

"James," the boy on the left answered, wiping a hand across his face to wipe off his tear tracks.

"Will," answered the dark-haired boy closer to him.

"Okay, James and Will. I can get you out of this, but you need to do exactly what I say. Can you do that?"

They nodded simultaneously.

"Good," Harry answered, moving his gaze away from the boys and locking eyes with the two snakes coiled on the floor. "Very slowly, I want you to start moving towards me."

As soon as the words had left his mouth, the snakes began to slither slowly towards him, eliciting a gasp from the girls beside him.

"Er, that didn't work," Harry warily remarked as the snakes approached.

"We knew it was you!" McLaggen yelled, a look of terror upon his face. Without warning, he turned and fled in the opposite direction, not giving a single glance back.

Wondering what had caused McLaggen's reaction, Harry noted that the snakes had moved a comfortable distance away from the two boys. Two quick stunners later, and they were eliminated as a threat.

"You spoke to them," Will said, his voice full of awe. His friend did not share Will's reaction, fear etched upon his face.

"Uh...what?"

"Why didn't you tell us you were a-" Millicent began, only to be cut off.

"Not now," Tracey snapped, before turning on the two boys. "you two, go back to the Common Room."

Will looked like he was about to argue, but something in Tracey's eyes stopped him.

"Thanks," he said quietly to Harry, before dragging his friend away, who looked grateful to be dismissed. Once they two boys were out of earshot, she rounded upon Harry.

"How come you didn't tell us you were a Parselmouth?"

"A – uh, what?"

"Someone who can talk to snakes," Millicent clarified, her expression grim. "I bet McLaggen is telling everyone right now."

"Telling them what? I told those two to move, and the snakes did instead. What's the big deal?"

The two girls exchanged glances at his statement.

"Harry," Millicent began uncertainly, "you didn't say anything. All we heard were a bunch of hisses."

At their claim, he stared at them in disbelief. What the hell were they talking about? Hisses?

"Look, we heard it," Tracey said, "and so did everyone else. You saw McLaggen's face."

Undeniably, he had. There had been fear in it, something close to terror. The Gryffindor had already feared him, but what had increased that?

"So I can talk to snakes, why is that such a..."

He trailed off, the fires of memory ignited. His first summer at the Flamels, he had pored through their history books. Hadn't Salazar Slytherin himself been known to talk to snakes?

"The Gryffindors just thought I was the Heir of Slytherin before."

"This is bad, Harry," Tracey said, biting her lower lip.

With growing unease, he saw her point. How long would it take for the entire school to know that he possessed Salazar Slytherin's 'gift'?

"Shit."

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

It had been a long road, and at times had seemed nearly endless, but it was with great satisfaction that Harry sat down for dinner, the last one of the term. Trying to concentrate upon his treacle tart, the thought of all the pairs of eyes upon him robbed the desert of all enjoyment.

"He's definitely a Dark Wizard, maybe worse than You-Know-Who!"

"Why hasn't Dumbledore kicked him out yet? He's a parselmouth!"

He tried not to hear them, the whispers, but it was hard to block them out when you heard them day-in, day-out. Walking to and from class, to the library, to meals, to-

The flutter of wings broke him from his thoughts. He looked up to see a Hogwarts barn owl drop of a letter before him, before shooting off towards the high, vaulted windows above the Great Hall.

"I almost thought they'd forget my nightly threat," Harry deadpanned, opening the letter penned in dark green ink.

Sure enough, it was, urging him to slither while he still could, before a boot crushed his head.

Whoever was sending him the letters, originality was not their strong point.

Rolling his eyes, he carelessly tossed it across the table. Millicent plucked it from the table, reading it quickly, the familiar response upon her lips.

"You should go to Dumbledore."

Harry laughed bitterly.

"It's not the first letter I've gotten, and it won't be the last."

"Why doesn't this bother you more?" she angrily demanded, slamming her fist down on the table.

"It's just talk," Harry said, forcing a grin onto his face. "They're trying to scare me into leaving."

"And when that doesn't work?" Millicent asked, her expression grim.

"Then the Gryffindors will try something," Tracey answered, crossing her arms.

"They've had all semester," Harry pointed out, though silently he agreed with his two friends. Sooner or later, they were going to take the next step.

"If they haven't already done it," Millicent added with a frown. "I still think we missed something really, really big that night."

"Either Weasley played Dean, or Dean played us," Tracey concluded, "but all we know is that Weasley took some of your hair, and what Dean told us."

"If it was even true," Millicent muttered darkly.

"If it was even true," the blonde muggleborn witch agreed. "and since I don't think Wealsey is going to be tremendously helpful, we have to talk to Dean."

"Yeah, I know, but-"

Harry had intended to say that Dean had avoided him like the plague as of late, but a loud, exaggerating clearing of a throat stopped him. Turning, he saw Padma Pati, shuffling her feet nervously.

"Oh, uh – hi Padma."

"Hi," she answered, a slight blush rising on her dark complexion. "C –can I talk to you for a moment."

"Uh, yeah, sure," Harry answered, getting his feet. Telling his two friends he'd see them later, he and Padma exited the Great Hall in silence. Countless stares of disbelief followed them out, as did a disconcertingly large number of narrowed expressions aimed at Padma.

With the dull roar of the Great Hall beginning to fade, she abruptly turned to face him.

"I-I'm sorry, Harry," she said, her dark, Trappistine eyes brimmed with sadness.

"Er, for what?"

Padma shook her head, sending her long, single dark plait bouncing to and fro.

"You don't have to be nice; I've been ignoring you all semester."

"That's not true," Harry disagreed, shaking his head. "We just haven't spoken much. If we had, the Gryffindors probably would bothered you as well."

Clearly ashamed, Padma lowered her head.

"I'm sorry, but I've seen what's happened to those Gryffindors, and I...I just didn't want them after me."

"No, I completely get it," Harry said with a nod, "but...why now? It would have been better if you did this between classes. Everyone saw what you did."

"But they should know! It's just all so stupid! Petrifying people, talking to snakes, being the next Dark Lord?"

"Most of it is stupid, but – er, I can talk to snakes. I really am a Parselmouth."

Padma was silent for a moment, her dusky cheeks practically glowing with blush.

"Well, that doesn't make you a bad person!"

Harry snorted before he could help himself, a bitter taste in his mouth.

"People know that Voldemort was a Parselmouth," he said, drawing a shudder from her. "When they see me, they see him."

"That's my point though!" she replied, eagerly seizing upon his point. "People need to change how they look at you."

He shrugged.

"They see a Dark Lord in training, coming to take Voldemort's place."

"And that's why we need to stand up. Most of the Ravenclaws are smart enough to see there's no way you could be the next Dark Lord, but don't want the Gryffindors to come down hard on them."

"How bad is it?"

"Bad," she replied, shaking her head. "After I told Parvati off, Charms class has been...unpleasant."

"I'm sorry, that isn't fair to you."

She let out a bitter laugh.

"You're the one that should be complaining. I'm so sick of people just going along with the Gryffindors because it's easier than fighting them."

She flashed him a small smile before continuing, displaying teeth that were remarkably white.

"Tonight, I decided to start fighting."

"Thanks a lot, Padma," he replied, grateful for her support. "If you ever need anything from me, just ask."

Padma's smile grew wider.

"Just as long as you aren't the Heir of Slytherin, we'll be all right," she joked.

"No promises."

She let out a small, musical laugh.

"Then I guess I'll have to think of something else. See you around, Harry."

With that, she turned and headed up the stairs, presumably towards the Ravenclaw Common Room. Once out of sight, the smile dropped from his face, her parting words stirring thoughts long ignored within his mind.

The Gryffindors were certainly wrong about a lot of things, but there was no denying he was a Parselmouth, a fact which should have been impossible, as they had apparently never been any other in the Potter lineage.

Which, terrifyingly, left only one feasible option.

Was a fragment of Voldemort's soul still embedded within his mind?

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

With all the hardships he had endured over the course of the term, Harry wanted nothing more than to merely sit in his compartment, and spend some quality time with his friends.

Sadly, he had work to do.

Pressing himself against a doorway, Harry barely avoided a Ravenclaw Prefect as she began to berate some students that had decided to play Exploding Snap in the corridor. Of course, she didn't see him, as he was hidden beneath his invisibility cloak. Once the prefect had passed, his eyes were drawn back towards the compartment where the majority of the second-year Gryffindors were known to converge.

According to Neville, no one in the school drank more water than Dean Thomas. Fortunately for Harry, this meant that sooner rather than later, Dean was going to have to hit the loo. He wished there was a better way to handle the situation, but the dark-skinned Gryffindor had not exactly made himself available for questioning, and Harry needed closure before winter break commenced.

After an hour of narrowly dodging students, the compartment opened, revealing the large form of Dean.

Finally.

As the Gryffindor passed by him, Harry followed closely behind. As Dean opened the door to the loo, Harry looked both ways, before whipping off his cloak and withdrawing his wand.

"Silencio."

As the scarlet spell struck, Harry shoved him forcefully into the bathroom, tucking the cloak into his robes. Caught by surprise, Dean fell against the wall awkwardly. Harry swiftly closed the door behind him, just in time to face Dean, whose lips were forming words Harry planned to never use around Perenelle.

With what he hoped was not misinterpreted as a clumsy come-on, Harry raised a single finger to his lips. Dean's face was drawn tightly in displeasure, but nonetheless he let out a curt nod. Satisfied, Harry canceled the silencer.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Dean whispered.

"Well, I needed to talk to you," Harry answered, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

Dean shook his head.

"I can't."

"Yes you can. I let down a lot of people that night. I deserve to know what really happened that night."

Dean merely stared at him, giving away nothing.

"Or was it all lies?" Harry asked, frustrated by Dean's silence. "Come on, there had to be a reason you risked talking to me!"

Dean let out a sigh at Harry's vehemence, his expression showing nothing but fatigue.

"Look, it's a long story, and I can't be gone for that long, or they might suspect something. First day of next term, meet me...you know where the statue of Gregory the Smarmy is?"

Harry nodded.

"Good, meet me there, alone, and I'll tell you everything."

"Are you going to be there this time?" Harry asked lightly.

Dean's eyes narrowed slightly.

"Look, I'm sorry about what happened, but...yeah, I'll be there."

"Good," Harry said, before turning and leaving the loo.

So much for closure.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Author Notes:

Thus, thankfully, I must add, concludes the first term of Harry's second year. An easy chapter to write, work commitments just kept me from finishing it in a timely manner.

Next chapter covers Harry's reunion with the Flamels, an unexpected trip, and the return of a character not seen since the prologue. My work schedule doesn't appear to be slowing down, so I wouldn't expect it for another three weeks.

As always, any comments or criticisms are welcome. Even a quick "liked it" or "it sucked" will suffice. Any questions, ask away. I answer every review I receive. That is, except for questions asked in anonymous reviews, which makes replying difficult.

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Twenty-Second Movement: Beneath a December Twilight

December 21, 1992

His arm held in a vise-like grip by his two guardians, Harry arrived at the Flamel vacation home, nestled deep within the Chamonix Valley. The pleasant aroma of smoky wood tickled his nose, its aroma calming him, washing away the worries of his fall term. Abandoning any sense of pretext, he wrapped his arms around Perenelle's waist, hugging her.

"It's nice to be home," Harry said quietly, his face pressed up against her soft robes, which were permanently imbued with the scent of her exploits within the greenhouse.

Perenelle froze at his touch, seemingly startled. Confused, Harry began to pull back, but she wrapped an arm around him in reassurance.

"We are glad to see you too," she replied, her tone level, revealing no hints as to what caused her initial recoil.

Turning his head to the side, Harry saw Nicolas frown for a moment, his bushy eyebrows contracting. The alchemist opened his mouth to speak, but Perenelle's firm shake of the head caused him to reconsider.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked, stepping away from Perenelle, who shook her head lightly.

"It's nothing that can't wait until you've had some time to settle," she stated, a small smile upon her lips.

While his first reaction was indignation, with every intention of pressing the issue, Harry relented. He had been angry for so much of the previous term, that now, more than anything else, he wanted quiet.

"Okay," he agreed, "but you have to tell me before I go back to Hogwarts."

Nicolas turned to his wife.

"This one certainly drives a hard bargain, does he not? Shall we indulge the young lad?"

Perenelle gazed upwards for a moment, as if looking for help.

"Perhaps instead you should indulge your aching mouth and give your tongue a rest."

Nicolas let out a hearty laugh.

"You know, it probably could use a brief respite. Would I be able to interest either of you two in a drink?"

"Sure," Harry answered.

"In that case, I have just the thing," the alchemist declared, "I shall return shortly."

"Shortly?" Harry whined.

"What treachery is this?" Nicolas declared, throwing up his hands. "A mere minute, and already you betray me?"

The corners of her mouth twitching, Perenelle shook her head a single time, pointing in the direction of the kitchen.

"Say no more," Nicolas replied with a smile and a regal bow, before making his way towards the kitchen.

"He's on a real roll today," Harry remarked.

Perenelle favored him with a fond smile.

"We are simply glad to have you back, especially after not hearing from you much over the course of the term."

"Well, uh – this term has been really bad," Harry began to explain awkwardly as his cheeks reddened, but Perenelle shushed him.

"It appears you have had quite the rough semester, so please, please understand that we are not displeased with you," she urged. "All that matters is that you returned from Hogwarts in one piece, and that you have returned home."

Harry nodded, grateful to not be grilled any further. He had certainly felt guilty about not writing them much, but with all the bad things that had happened during the semester, it had been so hard to dredge up positive things to write, that he had simply given up.

"But Harry," she continued, her eyes slightly sad, "while you did make it through the term, just by looking at you I can see it took a heavy toll."

While Harry's first instinct was to argue her point, he quickly conceded the point with a slight nod. He didn't want a repeat of last year, where every bad thing he hid from his guardians. His guardians had proven themselves more than deserving of his trust.

"It was really bad," he admitted with a sigh.

"Just remember that we are always here if you need us."

"I won't forget," Harry assured. As he answered, the kitchen door swung open wide, admitting Nicolas into the living room. He held a tray aloft, upon which precariously perched three large mugs with steam wafting off them.

"What's that?"

"This, Harry," Nicolas said with a wide grin, "is a staple of British wizarding fare. Despite my great distaste for your cuisine, I have to say that this particular item is simply exquisite."

"It's butterbeer," Perenelle said with a chuckle, swiftly cutting through her husband's hyperbole.

Nicolas sighed loudly, gazing upwards.

"Yet again, my thunder has been stolen."

"Wow, butterbeer!" Harry exclaimed, eyeing the mug. "You're really going to let me drink this?"

"It is merely butterbeer," Perenelle replied with smile, "not the most toxic of substances."

"Besides," added Nicolas, "you are well on your way to becoming an adult, and this is a cause for celebration."

With a word of thanks, Harry took the steaming mug from Nicolas, and inhaled deeply of it. Even its aroma was pleasant, a subtle mix of butterscotch and something else he couldn't place.

"To our continued health," Nicolas toasted, holding his own mug aloft. Harry and Perenelle followed his example, before drinking deeply from their own mugs. Pleasant warmth seemed to radiate forth from his throat, quickly reaching every part of his body, soothing him in a way he thought impossible.

It was good to be home.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Beneath a clear sky, on a Christmas day that was warmer than anyone had any right to expect, Harry stood with his arms crossed, staring at the recently planted oak tree.

"Doesn't look like we're going to get caught in a snowstorm this year," he said with a grin.

"I would certainly hope not," Perenelle replied, sending a single mistrustful glance towards the sky, "Once this decade was more than enough for me."

"It did bring us back though, did it not?" Nicolas asked.

"Bring you back where?" Harry asked, as his guardian turned and began walking back towards the center of the Flamel Grove.

"To where we used to risk our lives on a daily basis," answered Perenelle for her husband.

"You fought too?"

Perenelle let out a small chuckle at the mixture of awe and surprise in his voice.

"Indeed, this simple Herbologist used to be right at the frontlines with yonder fool, turning back the Dark tide."

"Uh, s-sorry," Harry apologized uncertainly, "I've just never heard you talk about it, and just didn't think..."

She waved him off with a small shake of her head.

"The image I present is purely intentional, Harry. The price we paid, the things we had to do...I would rather not think about it. Defending the Light often exacts a high toll."

"A very worthwhile one, however," Nicolas added.

Perenelle nodded in agreement, her clouded eyes clearing slightly.

"Unquestionably, and there is no better place than here to remind one of that fact."

Looking around, taking inventory of the immense trees grasping towards the heavens, Harry began to understand her point.

"This place wouldn't be here, would it?"

"It wouldn't," she agreed, pointing towards the tree in the center of the grove, the one which towered above all others.

"As servants of the Light, we have always been the target of the Dark. Had we faltered, they would have found this place, and burned it to the ground. As you can see, despite the dark times we have faced, these trees, our light, have never wavered. Through the centuries, they, much like ourselves, have endured, a monument that no matter how dark the night, the Light shall triumph."

Harry had heard the words before, but it never failed to send small shivers up his spine. Just being close to something that was far more ancient and far greater than himself...humbling was the closest he could come to describing it.

"Due to our close connection to the Light," Nicolas continued, "we can often sense when the Dark is near. It may be...well, slightly unfair to say so, but it affects us, offends our very senses."

At his guardian's words, Harry tensed. Where were they going with this?

Apparently sensing his unease, Perenelle placed a steadying hand upon his shoulder.

"Please, Harry," she assured, "we are not here to judge you."

"You know, though," he said quietly, eyes cast downward.

"We do," Perenelle confirmed, "but you need to know that we do not think any less of you."

Surprised, Harry raised his head, catching Nicolas' calm gaze.

"When we first met, did I not tell you that there have been numerous users of the Dark Arts throughout history?"

"Yeah," Harry agreed, "but, I mean..."

"You mean what?" Nicolas asked politely, raising his right eyebrow.

"Well...I mean – I didn't think you would be okay with it."

"It would have been easy to overreact in such a situation," Perenelle explained, "but we both respect you, and think that you would not have done so without reason."

"Or at least, we would hope," Nicolas added with a wink.

With a sigh, Harry concluded that they deserved the truth. How could they not, after being so accepting of his usage of Dark magic?

"This fall has been a lot worse than last year," he admitted, "and I've been in a lot of fights."

"You are more than capable of handling yourself," Nicolas said, crossing his arms.

"Yeah, against people my own age."

"Are older students attacking you?" Perenelle asked gravely.

Harry shook his head. Sure, the occasional third-year had tried, but no one was going to mistake McLaggen for the next Dumbledore.

"No, but it might happen if the younger ones try to get help, and I don't know enough offensive magic."

"Who said that?" Nicolas asked incredulously.

"Well, I dueled against an older Slytherin, who easily slapped away everything I threw at her. She said my style was too defensive."

"Harry," Perenelle said patiently, "defensive magic is the best way for a wizard to learn dueling."

Harry held out his hands.

"I know that. She said the same thing, just that I needed to learn some basic Dark spells to fight better."

At his words, Nicolas leaned down upon one knee, so that he was at Harry's eye level.

"Harry," he began, "I taught you in a specific fashion, so that you would be more than equal to your peers. Had I known that you were so concerned about your dueling prowess, I would have immediately offered to teach you more."

"You always wanted me to go slow," Harry countered, prompting a shrug from Nicolas.

"That is because you were just learning to duel, a skill which must be cultivated in a slow, careful fashion. Now, however, I freely admit that I was too slow to accelerate your training, an oversight I am more than willing to make up for."

"Really?"

"Really," Perenelle confirmed with a smile. "Besides, we still need to disavow you of that silly notion that Light magic contains no potent offensive weapons."

"Indeed," agreed Nicolas, chuckling slightly.

"Today?"

Perenelle shook her head.

"I am afraid not, as we have a busy day ahead of us. Surely you do not want to spend the holiday working?"

"Uh, I guess not," Harry conceded with a shrug. She was right.

After all, he did have the rest of the vacation.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

One foot in front of the other, as quietly as he could, Harry crept down the hall, his socks whispering softly against the hardwood floor. They didn't like him out at night, but he was thirsty, and wanted a glass of water.

Slowly making his way down the stairs, he heard angry words coming from the kitchen. What was it this time? Were they mad that he was out of bed? Creeping to the bottom of the stairs, he began to listen.

"He's far too young for this!" a voice that sounded like Richard said.

"As you are well aware, there is a reason that youth is required in these matters," the calm, cold voice of Crowley replied.

A hand slammed down upon the kitchen counter, causing young Harry to jump.

"Dammit, Crowley, I'm not going to let you destroy another child!"

"You took the same oath that I did, and you know what we're trying to do. Unless you've had a change of heart, perhaps?"

"You know that's not true."

"In that case, you must surely be aware of the burden that accompanies being one of the Fireborn, correct?"

"Oh, I'm certainly aware," Corwin replied darkly, "it's just not one a child should have to bear."

"What should or should not happen has no place here. All that matters is facts, most pertinent of which is that the mental strain associated with communion with the-"

"Silencio."

Harry went to spin around at the whisper from behind him, but a hand closed over his mouth. Unable to yell, he began to struggle, thrashing wildly from side to side.

"Be quiet!" a girl's voice hissed at him, beginning to drag him upstairs. He kicked hard against her, but couldn't slip away from her tight grip. At the top, she finally let him go, throwing him further down the hallway. Quickly picking himself off that hallway, he lowered his head, and began to charge at her.

"Why were you spying on them?" Jaime asked. The anger draining from him, Harry stopped his charge, guiltily staring at the ground. Jaime didn't want to hurt him, she only wanted to keep him out of trouble.

"I just wanted a drink of water, and heard Richard and Crowley arguing. Why were they mad?"

Jaime's expression drooped for a moment, before she shook her head lightly.

"Crowley thinks it's time to start teaching you."

"So they'd give me a wand?" Harry asked excitedly, perking up immediately.

At his words, Jaime held up her own, barely visible in the darkness. Ten inches of cherry she had once told him with pride in her voice, dragon heartstring. With a mumbled curse, Jaime shoved it furiously back into her pocket and stormed back towards her room, leaving behind a confused Harry.

It was supposed to be a great thing to get a wand.

Wasn't it?

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

His right eye narrowed, his sight focused down the length of his holly and phoenix-feather wand, Harry let out a deep breath.

"Malleus lux."

A jet of vibrant silver light leapt forth, searing through the air with a low hiss, barely missing a moving stone shield.

"Bollocks," Harry sighed wistfully. How much longer was Nicolas going to have him practice this stupid spell?

"Again," Nicolas humorlessly ordered, continuing to levitate the stone shield. Unenthusiastically, Harry cast again, missing badly.

"That was pathetic," Nicolas said quietly, a look of vast displeasure upon his face.

While anger instinctively flared up within, Harry squashed it quickly. Lashing out at Nicolas wasn't going to help.

"It's hard to hit a moving target," he mumbled, causing Nicolas to shake his head lightly.

"Harry, I have seen you hit moving targets before, No, I believe that you consider the 'light smasher' useless."

Harry remained silent, his opinion having been spoken for him.

"As always, silence speaks your consent. Let me ask you, then: How much did the thief seem to enjoy the Hammer of the Light?"

"Well...yeah, I guess," Harry conceded, "but he was infected by Dark magic."

Nicolas let out a slight chuckle.

"You are attending a school where students are being petrified, correct?"

Begrudgingly, Harry nodded.

"Well, I would certainly consider that very Dark magic, and whomever is responsible should be very susceptible to the Hammer of the Light."

"How much?"

"If you have any schoolmates that are heavily into the Dark Arts, I would advise you to not use it against them. The effectiveness of the spell is proportional to the taint of Dark magic within the target."

"What would happen if it hit Voldemort?"

"He would not find the experience to his liking," Nicolas dryly replied, prompting a small laugh from Harry. "In any event, now that I have properly impressed upon you the potential usefulness of the spell, I trust that your effects shall improve?"

"Yeah, definitely."

"Good, good. Would you be interested in moving to another subject, then?"

Harry nodded enthusiastically, more than happy to leave the current subject. Crossing his hands behind his back, Nicolas began to pace back and forth across the room, in full-on lecture mode.

"I have always tried to impress upon you that a duel against a skilled opponent is rarely won by tossing spells back and forth."

"Right," Harry agreed, "you have to use other stuff, like summoning and banishing."

"Exactly. Conjuraton, transfiguration and changing the environment are all essential keys to keeping an adversary upon their toes. For instance..."

Drawing his wand with a flourish, Nicolas sprayed an amber-colored liquid from it, drenching the floor to Harry's right. As the stifling stench of petrol invaded his nose, Nicolas followed up with a wide column of flames, igniting the fuel. Harry took an involuntary step backwards as the fire roared upwards, the heat driving him back.

"Uncomfortable, is it not?" Nicolas asked, before extinguishing the flames with a casual wave.

"Definitely, but wouldn't a simple flame-freezing charm have stopped it?"

"Ah-ha!" Nicolas declared, pointing his index finger at Harry. "That is correct, but it is something that needs to be dealt with, is it not?"

"It fits in with changing the environment, doesn't it?" he asked, beginning to see his guardian's point.

"Indeed. Instead of just thinking about the spells being exchanged, you have to consider the burning environment around you, not to mention the time it takes to cast a flame-freezing charm."

"Also, the smoke," Harry added, "but I think a Bubble-Head charm might work against that."

"It would, but again, it gives your opponent more factors to consider, giving you a mental edge."

Harry nodded, fully understanding the point of the lesson. Maybe during his next practice with Regina, he'd throw in some banishers and summoners, try to work on those a bit. Maybe even play with some fire.

She'd never know what hit her.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

The Warden's boots reflected the scant light thrown off by the torches, polished to a perfect sheen that magical means could only aspire to achieve. His dark uniform was without flaw or wrinkle, the pants and shirt so crisp they looked freshly laundered.

Each purposeful stride, measured exactly to three feet in distance, clacked softly upon the stone floor, seemingly repelling all water from the puddle throughout the lower levels of Azkaban. His bald pate, freshly shaved every day upon awakening, gleamed in the torchlight.

A dedicated soldier took pride in their work, and took pains to assure that their presentation was as immaculate as their work.

Turning a dimly lit corner, the Warden approached a lone dementor, maintaining its silent vigil. He passed without a twitch of an eyebrow, or a fault in his rigid posture. And why would he?

He who was without sin had nothing to fear from these loathsome creatures.

Behind him, he clearly heard the heart rate of the Aurors flanking his passage accelerate, and smelt the disgusting stink of their sweat pores opening. Good men, these Aurors, but far too quick to frighten. Perhaps next week's incoming recruits held more promise.

Despite the cells that surrounded him, housing the most dangerous and psychotic criminals in all of Britain, not a single whisper was heard from any of the prisoners. Like nocturnal creatures fleeing the sun, they backed away from the front of their cells as he passed, pressing themselves against the opposite wall.

Though it pleased him that his charges displayed proper respect for his absolute authority on Azkaban, it was still a source of minor frustration that this courtesy did not extend to his Aurors.

Perhaps some more punishments were in order.

Coming to a sudden stop, the Warden neatly pivoted on his heels, turning to the right. In front of him was a solid ironwood door, with a small, barred window two thirds of the way up, a foot in diameter.

"Sirius Black," the Warden began, his rough voice level, "you will approach the door to your cell."

From the shadows, an emancipated being shambled. Lank, ragged dark hair hung over his face, obscuring it.

"Yes, sir," Black rasped, shuffling to the door.

"You will put both of your hands through the window."

Once Black had pushed his pale, shriveled arms through the window, the Warden slipped a pair of handcuffs off his belt and slapped them

roughly over the prisoner's wrists. Black hissed quietly as he tightened the handcuffs, prompting the Warden to raise a single eyebrow.

"Did I give you permission to speak, Black?"

The prisoner in question shook his head a single time.

"I don't believe so, sir."

"You are correct, I did not. I am about to open the door, and you will walk with it as it opens."

Before the prisoner could reply, the Warden unlocked the door, swinging open the handle as hard as he could. Unprepared for the sudden movement, Black was dragged forward to the ground, without only his legs touching the ground. He hissed painfully as his prone arms were wrenched against the bars.

"Let this be a lesson that prisoners should only speak when spoken to," the Warden declared emotionlessly, before swinging the door closed again.

The heavy ironwood door slammed into Black's unprotected face with a loud crack, smashing into his forehead and nose. Blood pouring from his face, Black fought for consciousness, but quickly failed, falling limp against his bonds.

Reaching out, key in hand, the Warden quickly divested the unconscious prisoner of his shackles, placing them back onto his belt. Perhaps his punishment had been harsh, but there was nothing worse than a person traitorous to their cause. Even the Lestranges he had more respect for. Though heinous their crimes were, they had shown loyalty to their master all the way to the floor of the Wizengamot, a concept the piece of human garbage before him had no grasp of.

"Levitate the prisoner," the Warden ordered without turning. The Aurors behind him immediately rushed forward to follow his command, lifting the unconscious body off the floor. As he took off down the corridor, they followed behind, floating Black several feet off the floor.

For a short moment, a rare smile stretched across his lips.

If there was anyone more deserving of a trip to 'the basement' than Sirius Black, they had not yet arrived at Azkaban.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Awakening was like desperately trying to surface from a lake comprised of tar. Struggling, fighting against the pain and exhaustion he felt, Sirius surfaced. Opening his eyes slightly, he discovered that he was being levitated by two Aurors.

For a moment he considered trying to break the charm, but immediately discarded the idea upon glancing forwards slightly, and discovering that their procession was being headed by the Warden.

Sirius, upon arriving on Azkaban, had thought that nothing could be more frightening than the dementors.

His opinion had abruptly changed one year into his life-sentence, when he had first met the new Azkaban warden. He wasn't even sure of the man's real name, just that he was one scary motherfucker. A staunch believer in blind justice was the Warden, simultaneously reminding prisoners of the severity of their crimes and doling out punishment that may have landed him in Azkaban had word of their usage gotten out.

Taking inventory of his immediate surrounding, Sirius noted that the hallway he was being ferried down was even more dimly lit than what he was accustomed to. Though the dark masonry of the wall was similar, as opposed to the heavy, oppressive ironwood door the Warden had installed early in his tenure, the cells were comprised of bars of an unknown dark metal.

Where was he?

Hearing cries, Sirius flicked his gaze to the right. A short man, little more than skin and bones, madness shining in his eyes, thrust his arms through the bars, grasping towards the Warden.

"I'm innocent; you've got the wrong man! You have-"

With a movement so quick it was almost a blur the Warden withdrew his infamous ironwood club from his belt and swung it in a downward arc. The blunt end of the club smashed the man's right hand with a dull snap as it raked downward, tearing out several of his fingernails.

Screaming loudly, the man cradled his shattered, bloody hand against his chest, retreating towards the back of his cell. Oblivious to the man's agony, the Warden addressed the man.

"Proper prisoner etiquette states that a prisoner is not to speak unless spoken to. Is that clear?"

Continuing to whimper, the man slumped down the opposite wall, tears leaking from the corners of his eyes.

A cloud descending over the Warden's eyes, he stepped closer to the cell, his fingers clutched tightly around the club.

"I asked you a question, Pepper, and expect an answer."

"Y-y-yes," the man stammered, barely able to get the words out.

"Very well then," the Warden answered, before moving to the next cell and opening it. Unceremoniously, they dumped Sirius into the cell, his aching body colliding painfully with the stone floor. He considered asking a question, but thought that perhaps that might violate the Warden's 'etiquette'.

Breaking the Warden's etiquette was always a bad idea.

Without any further words, the Warden left, closely followed by the other Aurors. He waited a few minutes after their footsteps had faded, but it quickly became apparent they were gone for good.

Ignoring his pounding head, he approached the front of his cell, moving all the way to the left, as close as he could to the adjacent cell.

"Hey," he said softly. Met with only silence, he tried again, raising the volume of his voice.

"What do you want?" the man snuffled, still in obvious pain.

"What's your name?"

"O-Octavius Pepper."

The name was unfamiliar, certainly no one he had met before arriving at Hogwarts. A fairly new arrival, perhaps?

"Well, Octavius, where are we?"

"We've got to get out of here, before it's too late!" Pepper said, his voice becoming hysterical.

For the first time in a while, Sirius let out one of his bark-like laughs.

"Sorry to break it to you, but we're already at Azkaban. It's already a bit too late."

"No, no!" the man insisted, punctuating each words with a kick to the wall. "This is far worse than Azkaban ever was!"

Sirius froze slightly at the words. Worse than Azkaban?

"Octavius, what's going on here?" Sirius asked gently, hoping to calm the hysterical man into coherence.

Swallowing heavily, Octavius began to talk.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Author Notes:

This chapter contains about half the content I had planned, but the scenes at the Delacour Manor would just not come to me. After banging my head against the wall for two months, I ultimately decided to just save his trip until year three summer. I know this chapter's short, and admittedly not very interesting, but hey, it's an update.

Things will begin to pick up next chapter, where I begin to put in motion all the things I've been setting up. Only three more chapters to go in year two.

Sadly, work has become quite hectic again, so my writing time has taken a serious hit. I imagine the next chapter will be up by late October, but as always, work may get in the way.

As always, any comments or criticisms are welcome. Even a quick "I liked it" or "it sucked" would be appreciated. Any questions, ask away. I reply to every review I receive. That is, except for anonymous ones. Rather difficult to reply to those.

Thanks to mira mirth and scaryisntit for their help in the planning process.

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Twenty-Third Movement: Crystal Shards

January 3, 1993

A dark expression of annoyance upon his face, Harry Potter made his way down the Hogwarts' Express corridor. With both hands he dragged his trunk, wondering if perhaps this year, he and the Flamels should have arrived later.

In light of the swarm of negative media attention he'd received this year, Perenelle suggested that he not use any magic until he got to Hogwarts, especially early in the day. With only a few students at King Crossing, it could be easy to pin an underage magical usage violation on him.

Probably the last thing he needed on top of everything else.

With a heavy pant, he dug in his feet, flung an angry glare at his trunk, and closed the final few yards to the rear compartment. Pushing the bulky trunk through the doorway, he paused for a moment to catch his breath.

Pathetic. Was he the only guy in his year that couldn't even move his own trunk? All the other kids in his year seemed to get bigger, but not him. Well, at least he didn't have to depend on his size in a fight.

Thank you magical world.

Bending down, he lifted up his trunk. His muscles straining against the weight, he attempted to push the cursed trunk onto the storage rack, but couldn't reach high enough to push it over the lip.

Bloody hell.

Rising up on his toes, he heard the compartment door open. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Millicent enter.

"Hi," he grunted, the bulk of his concentration still on the trunk.

"Having trouble?" she asked lightly.

Harry chose to ignore her, straining upwards against the trunk. Only a few more inches...

Without warning, the weight of the trunk disappeared. Glancing to his right, he saw Millicent, towering above him, casually place the trunk onto the storage rack.

"I almost had it!" he exclaimed.

Millicent appraised him with a single raised eyebrow, before letting out a mocking laugh.

"Yeah, you were doing great."

"Okay, maybe I was having a little trouble," Harry admitted with a grin. "I owe you one."

"Maybe you can do one of my Potions essays this term?" she suggested coyly.

"How could I say no?" he asked, easily agreeing to the request. Millicent had never made any secret of her dislike for the subject, or the countless essays the Snape assigned.

"Awesome," she replied with a wide smile. "You know, you look really good."

"Uh, thanks."

"I don't mean it like that," she quickly clarified, her face growing red. "Well, I do, but that's not what I...bollocks."

"No, I understand," he assured, not wanting to embarrass Millicent any further. "Being miles from Hogwarts, away from the Gryffindors...it was great. I haven't felt this good in a while."

"Well, it's nice to see you actually doing well," she declared, the blush in her cheeks fading.

"Was I that bad last term?"

She nodded, her dark, lank hair bouncing slightly.

"When things get that bad, it's kinda hard to hide it."

"I did try," he admitted.

"I know, and if we didn't see you everyday, then maybe you could have fooled us. But..."

She trailed off, shrugging her massive shoulders. For a moment, she looked like she had more to add, but the compartment door swung open, attracting both their attentions.

Neville entered through the door, dragging his trunk behind him.

"Hey guys," he greeted, before stowing his own trunk. Harry couldn't help but notice that Neville didn't seem to have any trouble getting it up on the racks. Maybe it really was just him.

For a few minutes, they exchanged Christmas stories. Harry talked of his blissfully quiet winter break in France, while Neville talked of entertaining his entire family at the Longbottom Manor, and Millicent told them about going to Ireland to see her mother's side of the family.

Before long, the door opened again, admitting a bickering Hermione and Tracey.

"Picking up where you left off last term?" Harry asked.

"Gran always says consistency is important," Neville added.

Unsurprisingly, both comments were ignored. With a huff, Hermione sat down, arms crossed, next to Millicent, who was clearly trying not to laugh.

Tracey, acting as though nothing was wrong, sat down between Harry and Neville, across the compartment from her academic rival.

"I just had a wonderful conversation about the positive aspects of the Dark Arts," Tracey declared, brushing a stray strand of hair behind her ear.

"Can you actually stop, and listen to yourself for a moment?" Hermione asked shrilly, her tone incredulous. "Rationalizing the Dark Arts is what begins to corrupt people!"

To Harry's surprise, Millicent's rebuttal was the quickest.

"Am I too evil to be around, then?"

Thrown off balance, Hermione stuttered for a moment.

"Perhaps," Millicent said forcefully, "you should have put a little more thought into things."

"But You-Know-Who st-"

"Who cares?" the large girl demanded, throwing her hands up in the air. "My Dark, supposedly 'evil' family supported Dumbledore financially during the War, and gave him information on Death Eaters."

Hermione took a moment to inhale deeply, restoring some of her composure.

"I'm not insulting your family," she carefully clarified, "but why then does Hogwarts refuse to teach the Dark Arts? It's dangerous, Millie. Just look at some of the stuff in the Restricted Section. If a first-year ran across some of those books, they could easily hurt themselves, not to mention other people."

"And you don't think having a professor teach the subject would help?" Millicent asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Think about it," Tracey added, stepping in. "If a student had someone teach them proper usage of Dark spells, trained them, would it be as dangerous?"

"Of course not," Millicent answered. "Instead of being forced to mess around with books stolen from the Restricted Section, they'd be able to learn the safe way."

"I think Dumbledore's doing the right thing," Neville said quietly, throwing his two cents into the discussion.

"Big surprise there," Millicent replied with a small laugh.

"Well, think about," he urged, leaning forward, his expression earnest. "If someone used Dark magic at an early age, they'd have trouble using Light magic later in their lives."

"So it's okay to teach Light magic here, but not Dark?" Tracey haughtily asked.

"Well, it is Dumbledore running the school," Harry pointed out. "You know, the most powerful Light wizard in the world?"

His comment drew a chuckle from the assembled group, save for Tracey, who threw a lackluster glare in his direction.

"Anyway, that's not true," Neville pointed out, "I've talked to my Gran about this. There's no Light magic in the school's curriculum."

"Bullshit," Tracey quickly replied, shaking her head.

"Definitely bullshit," Millicent agreed. "I mean...it's Dumbledore."

"Am I the only one here who's read 'Hogwarts: A History'?" Hermione loudly exclaimed.

"Obviously," Tracey answered, drawing a laugh from the group.

"Apparently," Hermione said with a sniff, barely concealing her grin. "While it's true that Dumbledore isn't a fan of Dark magic, ever since he started at Hogwarts, his teaching methods have remained the same. He believes that a decision about one's magical usage should only be made after a lot of experience working with magic. He only teaches neutral magic here, so that people can leave Hogwarts with the freedom to make their own decision."

Harry had read it all before, but was surprised that neither of his Slytherin counterparts had.

"Did you hear that?" Tracey asked to Millicent, shaking her head mournfully. "We have to wait until after Hogwarts until we become evil, Dark witches."

And with that, the semester was off to its normal pace. Sitting there, laughing with his closest friends, despite the many trouble that lay ahead at Hogwarts, he thought that maybe this term things would be different.

Better, even.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Mechanically, Harry quickly shoveled kippers and eggs into his mouth, tasting nothing. Though the fare was up to Hogwarts' high standards, his mind was elsewhere. Breakfast could have been gruel, and he would have had no complaint.

Though winter break had been peaceful, a time to let the burdens of fall term fall away, his thoughts had occasionally strayed to Dean Thomas, the sole member of Ron Weasley's little clique that seemed to have any sense of logic.

Hopefully the tall Gryffindor would actually show up today. To date, he'd been extremely careful about hiding their meetings. If Dean sensed anything was wrong, he'd cancel without hesitation.

Not what Harry was looking for today.

Shoving a half-full plate to the center of the table, he took one final swig of pumpkin juice, before swiftly rising and heading to the Great Hall's exit. There were only a few other students around, all of which were recent arrivals, blinking away the last vestiges of sleep.

Exiting the Great Hall, he made his way towards the main staircase. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw two familiar figures exit from the dungeons. Stopping, he turned and addressed them.

"Good morning," he greeted, grinning at their state.

Tracey's normally flawless blonde hair was frizzy and sleep-mussed, sticking up in every direction. Millicent, her eyes still more asleep than awake, swayed from side to side.

"We're going with you," Tracey declared, her voice far clearer than her appearance would indicate.

"No, I have to do this alone."

Millicent shook her head in response.

"That's not smart," she pointed out blearily.

"I can trust Dean."

"Can you?" Tracey contested, her eyes narrowed. "After all, he did say they were going to raid the Slytherin dorms. Did we miss that or something?"

"Dean wasn't lying," Harry insisted. "Something must have come up."

"Or," Millicent countered, "The Gryffindors knew you'd think it was a trap, and did nothing."

"What are you talking about? That doesn't make any sense!"

Tracey shook her head.

"Yes it does. Maybe you're just not seeing the entire picture, and this is all part of their plan."

"What plan?"

"To get you to trust one of them!" Tracey exclaimed, as if it was obvious. "The Gryffindors have been threatening you all year! What if this is it? To get you alone, and attack you."

Harry remained silent following Tracey's claim. Sure, maybe it was possible...but wasn't it a bit of a stretch?

"I don't know," he said heavily, running a hand down the side of his face. "You weren't there. The fear, the uncertainty I saw in Dean's eyes...it wasn't an act. He really did want to warn me of something."

Looking at his two friends, Harry saw only doubt in their eyes, causing frustration to bloom forth.

"Really," Tracey began, her tone weary, "How well do you really know Dean?"

"It doesn't matter," Harry snapped back irritably. "I heard the truth in his voice."

Tracey's eyes narrowed further for a moment, before returning to normal as her lips drew back slightly, revealing a cruel smile.

"Fine, go ahead. I'm sure Flint will completely understand when I tell him you're meeting with a Gryffindor without any support."

"You wouldn't!" Harry exclaimed angrily.

"Watch me," she replied coldly, before turning swiftly. Her blonde, frizzed hair whipped about her as she rushed in the opposite direction, back towards the Slytherin dormitories.

"Come on!" Harry urged, throwing his arms in the air, but she didn't even slow. "I don't believe this."

"We're only trying to help you," Millicent quietly pointed out. "Going up there without any support is stupid, Harry."

"Fine!" he snapped loudly. Halfway down the steps, Tracey froze at his words, mid-step.

"You can come with me," he conceded, "but you're waiting outside the room, just like you did at the Owlery."

"Not good enough," Tracey said, dismissing his compromise.

"Yes it is," Millicent said loudly, causing Tracey to turn, a look of annoyance on her face.

"I thought we agreed on this."

"Yeah, we both think we're right, but that doesn't mean we are. He at least deserves the chance to find out either way. If it goes wrong, at least we can help him."

Tracey didn't look happy with her friend's argument, but nonetheless came back up the stairs, joining them at the foot of the stairs.

"Anything else?" Harry spat angrily, stung by his friends' betrayal. How could they threaten to go behind his back like that?

At their lack of reply, he turned his back and stomped up the stairs. Harry seethed in silence, wishing he'd gone to breakfast even earlier. A difference of a minute, and he might have made a clean getaway.

"I know you're pissed now," Millicent acknowledged, breaking their heavy silence, "but after all that's happened this year, we...well, you shouldn't be trusting anyone in Ron's circle."

"Unless Harry's just looking for an excuse to try out some of Yaxley's curses without any witnesses," Tracey offered.

Harry ignored her comment, instead addressing Millicent.

"You know, I get it, why you'd think that, but you weren't there, didn't hear his words."

Millicent shrugged as they reached their destination, clearly unconvinced.

"Is this it?" she asked, pointing at the statue, which Harry confirmed with a nod. If the scale was accurate, Gregory the Smarmy had been an extremely fat wizard, covered in thick robes that must have comprised a square mile of fabric. His bald pate shone in the torchlight, contrasting with thick, bushy eyebrows.

Directly across from the statue was an open door, leading to an unused classroom.

"I've got it from here," he declared, turning his attention towards the doorway.

"We'll be here waiting," Millicent said softly, while Tracey merely kept her eyes on the ground, her expression sour. Swallowing his pride, Harry thanked them quickly, before turning and entering through the doorway, closing the door behind him.

Dust covered the floor and sparse furnishings of the room, which was clearly outside the responsibility of the house-elves. At the far end of the room, staring out at the grey infinity of the winter landscape, Dean Thomas stood.

"Thanks for coming," Harry said, relieved that Dean actually was able to show up this time.

Hands clasped behind his back, Dean remained silent, merely continuing to stare out the window. Unease beginning to creep in, Harry moved closer, reaching his right hand into his robe, keeping his wand at the ready.

"What's wrong?"

"I...I'm not feeling that great," Dean wearily replied, sounding completely drained.

"Why's that?" Harry asked, moving closer. Dean turned at his question, right hand drawn backwards. Before Harry could react, his fist pistoned forward, launching into Harry's midsection. The blow from the punch knocked the breath from his lungs, sending him crumpling to the floor.

"You see," said Dean, "all this 'being nice to you' stuff, its been making me sick."

Reaching into his robes, the large boy drew his wand, pointing it at Harry.

"Expelliarmus!"

Gasping for air, Harry scuttled backwards, the spell impacting harmlessly against the floor.

"Petrificus totalus!"

Hearing the incantation from behind him, Harry tried to roll out of the way, but the spell clipped his arm. At once, he lost control of his body as it stiffened out, straight as a board. Laid out flat upon the cold floor, helpless, worry began to settle in. Where the fuck were Tracey and Millicent?

"Like we'd let anyone interrupt this," a familiar voice to his right snorted. Moments later, Cormac McLaggen came into view, viewing his prone form with clear distaste. With a sneer, he bent down,

ripping Harry's book-bag from his shoulder. Dean did the same with his wand, before eyeing the holly speculatively.

"Should we snap it?"

Cormac let out a cruel bray of laughter as he dumped the contents of Harry's book-bag onto the floor.

"We should, but it will have to wait."

"Fine," Dean conceded with a shrug. "Can I at least throw it out the window?"

"Sure, why not?"

Frozen, Harry could only watch in horror as Dean went over to the window, opening it to the frigid air outside, letting in stray snowflakes. Carelessly, he tossed the wand out the window.

"I wouldn't worry too much about the wand," Dean mentioned casually. "I'm sure you'll find it eventually."

"Can't say the same thing about your books, though," Cormac said, before bringing his wand downward.

"Incendio!"

A thin tongue of flame leapt from his wand, contacting Harry's possessions. The fire tore through his books hungrily, engulfing them within seconds. Anger began to course through Harry's veins as the two Gryffindors began to laugh manically.

His books, half a year's worth of notes, quills, parchment and ink, all gone.

He desperately tried to fight against the binding curse, but still was unable to move even an inch, enraging him further. If he had his wand, he'd be more than willing to show them some of Regina's nastier teachings.

"Look at the bright side," Dean said breathlessly, wiping at his eyes. "We could have done a lot worse."

"And believe us, we will," Cormac continued, "that is, unless you leave Hogwarts by the end of the month."

With that, they stepped out of his vision. He heard the slam of a door closing, probably the closet that Cormac had come from. Concentrating fiercely, he tried to mentally flex against the magical bonds holding him down, but got nowhere. Where the fuck were his friends?

As if on cue, Tracey entered the room, wand held aloft. She quickly undid the body-bind, while Millicent worked on extinguishing the flames.

Free, Harry jumped to his feet, and ran towards the closet. Throwing wide the doors, he beheld an empty closet. Footprints peppered the floor, but gave no indication as to where the two Gryffindors had gone.

"Where the bloody hell did they go?" he demanded angrily, kicking the wall.

"We never saw them," Tracey quickly replied, glancing around the closet. "Are there any secret passages that connect to this room?"

"I don't know!" Harry snapped back angrily. "Where the hell were you two?"

"You're the one who closed the door behind you," Tracey snapped back, her eyes narrowed.

Throwing a sharp glance at her friend, Millicent turned back to Harry.

"Look, we're sorry," Millicent said "The room must have been silenced earlier; we didn't hear anything from outside."

Nearly shaking with anger, Harry punched the wall in frustration, before storming back into the middle of the room, and looking down.

All his books, their margins overflowing with his personal notes and discoveries, were nothing but ash. His other possessions were all in similar shape.

"Fuck!" Harry screamed, kicking the pile of smoldering ashes. Turning, he stormed back towards the hallway.

"Where are you going?" Millicent asked quietly.

"Those Gryffindor wankers threw fucking my wand out the window!" he replied heatedly, drawing a wince from both of the girls.

"We'll help you look for it," Millicent offered, joining him.

"What's the point?" Harry snapped heatedly. "No point in you two being late for class too."

Tracey shook her head.

"If we all search, we'll find it more quickly."

Gritting his teeth, he looked past his two friends, to the large window. Flurries of snow swirled across the backdrop of the steel-grey sky, reducing visibility down to almost nothing, while the howling wind rattled the windowpanes.

Searching for his wand, in that, all by himself?

That would have sucked slightly more than his current situation did.

"Thanks, guys," he replied, swallowing down the anger welling within him. Without further comment, they walked away from the classroom.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Shivering deeply, fingers and face numb from the cold, Harry stumbled towards the Defense classroom. The hour spent blindly fumbling through the snow had taken the edge off his temper, calming the desire to find both of the Gryffindors and practice some of his nastier Dark curses on them.

If not for Tracey, they might have still been out there, but luckily, she had found it. Soaked to the core, all he wanted to do was slip in discreetly, sit at the back of the room and plot some sort of way of getting back at Cormac and Dean.

Fate, as it often did, had other plans.

"Harry!" Lockhart exclaimed upon his entry. "The day I reveal the truth about Salazar Slytherin's monster, you decide to be late! Very bad form, Harry."

Using the distraction to their advantage, Tracey and Millicent slipped in unnoticed, taking seats at the back of the classroom. Resisting the urge to take Daphne's copy of 'Magical Me' off her desk and put it through Lockhart's blindingly white teeth, he turned his attention back to the professor, forcing a plastic smile back onto his face.

"I'm sorry, Professor. I couldn't find my wand."

Lockhart let out a hearty chuckle at his less-than-sincere apology.

"Well, be sure to hold onto your wand from now on, alright? Especially with Slytherin's monster running amok. Why, do you think that I could have vanquished the Bandon Banshee without my wand?"

"Probably not," Harry lamely answered, biting back what he really wanted to say. Taking a seat at the front of the class, he considered how odd it was that Cornish Pixies were more difficult for Lockhart to handle than a banshee.

"Now," Lockhart began, clapping his hands together, "I don't want to alarm the lot of you too much, but it is now clear what's been attacking students. You see, I didn't realize it at first, but I've seen the creature before."

Harry let out an exaggerated sigh, not bothering to smother it. If Dumbledore hadn't already seen it, there was almost no way Lockhart had.

Either oblivious to his reaction, or choosing not to notice it, Lockhart continued, lowering his voice an octave.

"On a trip to an island off the southern shore of Greece, I came across an isolated village where people were being turned into stone. Investigating into the matter, I discovered that one of the most vile Dark creatures in the world had been awakened."

"What was it?" Blaise asked, leaning forward.

"A Medusa," whispered Lockhart, gravely.

For a moment, Harry could only stare in shock, before letting out a snort of laughter. He tried to cover it with a cough, but it was a case of too little, too late. His reaction drew a glare of annoyance from Lockhart.

"A what?" Daphne asked, clearly confused.

"A Medusa," Lockhart began to explain, "is a creature that is half snake, half human. Its hair is made of snakes, and its gaze turns the unsuspecting into stone."

Harry's mouth dropped open in disbelief. Who the hell did this guy think he was? There was definitely no such thing as a Medusa.

"I've never heard of those," commented Daphne.

"Very few of them remain," Lockhart replied. "Salazer Slytherin captured one of the final remaining Medusas, and set it to guard his hidden Chamber."

"If you know what it is, why haven't you caught it yet?" Tracey asked, her tone incredulous. Clearly, Harry wasn't the only one having trouble swallowing Lockhart's story.

Lockhart shook his head, his expression somber.

"Sadly, the creature rarely leaves the Chamber, which I have yet to locate. However, the clues are starting to add up, and it's only a matter of time until I find the entrance."

First the Gryffindors burn his stuff and throw his wand out the window, and now he has to listen to this idiot try to give people a false sense of security?

No way.

Harry immediately raised his hand high.

"Yes, Harry?"

"Well, sir, I read somewhere that Medusa is just an imaginary creature from a muggle story.

Lockhart shook his head lightly.

"The Medusa is just as real as you or me, Harry, and far more dangerous."

"More dangerous than Cornish pixies?" Harry asked innocently, drawing a chuckle from the rest of the class.

Lockhart's expression grew annoyed for a moment, before his wide smile returned, albeit looking a bit false.

"One of the reasons a Medusa is so dangerous," Lockhart explained, ignoring Harry's last words, "is because only a Parselmouth can speak to them. You don't happen to know any of those, do you, Harry?"

Harry remained silent, not rising to Lockhart's bait. Instead, he merely met Lockhart's gaze, unblinkingly.

You want a war, Gilderoy?

You fucking got one.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

"Are you really sure you want to do this?" Neville asked, searching his friend's face for reassurance.

"I am," answered Harry with complete confidence. "He sucks as a teacher, he tried to use to save his career, and now he's trying to threaten me."

Neville was silent for a moment, taking the opportunity to pull his crimson and gold scarf tighter. Cold and drafty during normal winter days, the halls of Hogwarts became positively frigid at night.

"What if he's just trying to scare you?" Neville asked, his adjustments complete.

"I don't think so. Every single thing Lockhart's done, or, well, says he's done; he's sold for a book."

"Well, yeah, we know he's making most of it up, but what would he want with you? I he's probably figured out you're not going to help his career."

"Not willingly," Harry pointed out as they approached the ornate oak doors.

"What do you mean?"

"Think about it: We already know that Lockhart's career is in trouble, why else would he take the job here?"

Neville nodded, urging him to continue.

"Well, most of the school thinks I'm evil, not to mention the Prophet has been slandering me all year. If Lockhart is desperate enough, I think he might try to frame me for the attacks."

Neville's eyes widened in shock for a moment, before he shook his head.

"No, no way, Harry. I don't believe a professor would do that?"

"Why not?" Harry challenged. "We already know there's no way he could have done most of the things in his books. No, if he could get away with it, he'd frame me for the attacks and then write a book about how he saved Hogwarts from the Heir of Slytherin."

Neville, looking unconvinced, opened his mouth to retort, but the opening of the office door distracted him.

"What are you two waiting for?" Algernon Longbottom demanded, arms outstretched. "Come in, come in, it's freezing out here."

Without waiting for an answer, he ushered them inside, closing the door behind him. A large fire crackled within the fireplace on the far wall, throwing flickering light across the office. Warmth immediately spread across Harry's skin, expelling the castle's chill.

Where Algernon's desk had formerly resided, now sat three crimson stuffed chairs, placed upon a plush carpet.

"I think you'll find this arrangement far more comfortable than the usual setup," Algernon explained, guiding them over to the chairs.

Harry nodded in agreement as he fell gracelessly into the chair. It was just as comfortable as it looked, more so than any of the chairs in the Slytherin Common Room. Settling into the chair, he soaked up the warmth of the flames, feeling the final shackles of the cold fall away.

Neville let out a loud sigh of contentment, drawing a chuckle from his great-uncle.

"It would appear my hypothesis was indeed correct."

"It really was," Harry agreed. "Thanks."

Algernon casually waved his hand.

"It takes little effort to make someone more welcome. In fact, before I forget, can I offer either of you two a butterbeer?"

"Really?" Neville asked excitedly, his eyes wide.

"Certainly," Algernon agreed, stroking his thick beard. "That is," he continued, in a conspiratorial whisper, "providing you don't tell my sister about it."

Not needing any further encouragement, Neville nodded enthusiastically.

"Harry?"

"Oh...uh, yes, please, sir," Harry replied quickly.

"Now, none of that!" Algernon crankily corrected, reaching into a cabinet behind him. "I already feel ancient enough," he grumbled, withdrawing two mugs, and handing one to each of the boys, filled to the brim with the frothy liquid. "Algernon will be quite alright."

Harry nodded, thanking him for the butterbeer.

"You are welcome," the older man replied, before withdrawing his wand and waving it over the mugs. At once, the mug became warm beneath his hands, and steam began to waft off its surface.

"Much better," better he said, going back to the cabinet. He with drew a glass decanter filled with amber liquid, pouring himself a generous amount. Taking a small drink, he smacked his lips.

"Horace may have his faults, but taste was never one of them," the older man said, almost to himself, before shaking his head slightly, refocusing on his two guests. "You don't need my permission, go ahead, drink up."

"Well, if you insist," Harry replied with a grin, bringing the mug to his lips and drinking deeply.

The warm liquid expelled every remnant of chill from his body, leaving behind a pleasant warmth that stretched all the way from his toes all the way to the tips of his ears.

"Not bad, eh Neville?" Algernon asked with a knowing, slightly mischievous grin.

"Definitely not," he agreed.

"I thought you might like it," his uncle replied, settling his considerable bulk into the armchair. "I wish I could have slipped you some before this, but it's dreadfully difficult to get away with anything under Augusta's nose."

"It was worth the wait."

Algernon chuckled slightly.

"I'm sure it was. Not to rush you two, but we've a fair bit to discuss, and I've no wish to keep you out past curfew. I believe you wanted to speak to me about Gilderoy Lockhart?"

"We were wondering if you had found out anything about him," Harry replied, leaning forward.

"I've found out a great deal," Algernon answered, resting his hands upon his large stomach, "but the information is of a very sensitive nature. Can I trust the both of you to keep these matters to yourselves?"

Harry and Neville both answered in the affirmative.

"Are you sure?" Algernon challenged, leaning forward, fixing his gaze upon Harry. "If what Neville tells me is true, the conflict between you and Professor Lockhart has become rather personal in nature. I absolutely cannot, under any circumstances, have you revealing any of what we know. Tipping our hand at this juncture could potentially prove disastrous."

"Why? Does he have a lot of friends at the Ministry?"

Algernon shook his head.

"It's an odd situation, to be sure, especially considering that Lockhart made a lot of enemies during his rise to fame. One would think that friends would be in short supply..."

Trailing off, Algernon took another drink. Placing his glass back down, he continued.

"However, he would appear to have at least two friends with a connection to the Board of Governors, since all inquiries into sealed Hogwarts' records have been blocked."

"So the Board is protecting him?" Harry asked.

"It could be only one person," Algernon admitted, "but they'd have to possess considerable influence to get others to go along with it, and of the few governors capable of such pull, I can't think of a single reason why any of them would do so. Well, actually, I know why she...never mind," he said, shaking his head. "The important thing is that building an official case is going to be difficult without access to the records."

"Why do we need the records?" Neville asked.

"We need the records to prove what we already know," Algernon answered.

"That Lockhart isn't qualified to teach flobberworms?" Harry offered.

"Correct."

"We knew that after five minutes," Harry muttered, drawing a chuckle from Algernon.

"You don't know how right you are. I've a friend on the Ministry's examination Board, who spoke to me off the record. He complained that Lockhart was one of the worst students that he tested, completely inept with a wand."

"How many OWLs did he get?"

Algernon's smile grew wide at Harry's question, but he remained silent.

"Wait, did he get any?" Harry asked, his eyes widening.

"He had to have," Neville stated, before glancing at his great-uncle. "Right?"

"One would certainly think so, wouldn't they? However, this particular examiner was fairly certain that Lockhart was one of the only Hogwarts students to ever achieve the feat of not receiving a single OWL."

"How is this idiot teaching here?" Harry exclaimed.

"A fair question, since according to the Ministry's standards, a NEWT is required in a given subject to be able to teach it. Whoever is helping Lockhart pulled a lot of strings to get him hired."

"And that same person is protecting him," Harry said with a groan. "How were they ever going to get rid of him if he was protected?"

"Indeed, it is a problem," Algernon agreed. "Since the records are sealed, we can't use them to build a case against him."

Harry signed dejectedly.

"So we can't do anything?"

Algernon shook his head.

"We can, but we have to build the case in a different way."

"How?" asked Neville.

"Well, it took a great deal of searching, but I finally found her."

"Katelyn Wellington?" Harry asked hopefully.

Algernon inclined his head slightly.

"Indeed. She was a former classmate of Lockhart, a Hufflepuff one year behind him."

"Why was she so hard to find?" Harry asked. "I mean, there had to be someone here that remembered her, right? Friends that stayed in touch with her after Hogwarts."

Algernon shook his head, adopting an expression of solemnity.

"Katelyn was a muggleborn, and as such, had no pre-existing ties to our world. She was a quiet, promising student, who tragically never finished her fifth year of Hogwarts."

"W-what happened?" Neville asked apprehensively, prompting a heavy sigh from Algernon.

"For the past fifteen years, Katelyn has been at a kind of muggle hospital, which made her difficult to track. She hasn't moved, spoken, or had any other reaction to anything since arriving."

The room went silent for a short time following Algernon's words. Harry couldn't help but wonder what he had stumbled onto. How bad was this guy?

"What did Lockhart do to her?" Harry quietly asked.

Algernon shook his head.

"There's no record of him doing anything to her. From what I've been able to find, she was found up on the Astronomy Tower, sitting

against the wall, unmoving. I'm sure St. Mungo's did their own investigations, but I haven't been able to gain access to the files yet."

"Just like them," Neville whispered. Turning to appraise his friend, Harry saw that his friend was unnaturally pale, and that his eyes had taken a pained expression.

"Neville, what's wrong?"

Algernon, confusion etched upon his face, studied his great grand-nephew for a moment, before freezing. After a moment's time, comprehension dawned, prompting Algernon to promptly rise to his feet.

"Neville, I'm so sorry, I...shite, Harry, would you excuse the both of us for a moment?"

"Uh, yeah, sure," Harry answered, slightly confused by his friend's reaction. "I'll just wait outside, okay?"

Neville shook his head slightly.

"Look, Harry...I'll just see you tomorrow."

"Um, are you sure?"

Algernon shifted his eyes to the door for a moment, before bringing them back to Harry.

"Go on ahead," he urged, "we just have to talk about a few things."

"Okay, well...thanks for seeing us both."

"You're very welcome, Harry. If I find out anything new, I'll let you know."

With that, Harry took leave of them room, closing the door behind him, his mind racing. Despite all the information that had just been dumped upon him, one question attracted the bulk of his intellect.

What had upset Neville so badly?

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Walking quickly down the freezing, deserted halls of Hogwarts by night, his breath bringing forth plumes of vapor, it was not only Neville's reaction that bothered him, but Algernon's.

What was one to make of the Hogwarts Governor's reaction? There had been equal parts knowing and confusion in the elderly man's face. It was almost like...had Algernon expected him to know what was going on?

Thrusting his hands beneath his armpits to dredge up the last of the office's remaining warmth, Harry concluded that Algernon was making false assumptions. He had no idea why the story of Katelyn Wellington had upset Neville so much. Yeah, it was sad, but Neville's reaction had reached beyond that. It was almost like -

"...so...hungry..."

"Oh shite," Harry whispered to himself, all thoughts of cold forgotten. The voice was faint, far away from the dungeons. It sounded like it was coming from upstairs.

Neville!

Pivoting sharply, Harry turned and sprinted in the opposite direction, his trainers slapping loudly against the flagged stone. Sucking in mouthfuls of cold air, he sprinted up the stairs leading to the dungeon.

Whatever this thing was, he wasn't going to let it take his friend.

"...kill...time to kill..."

The phantom voice growing slightly louder, Harry burst out from the dungeon entrance. Hitting the stairs in the main entryway, he shot up the stairs, taking them four at a time, praying that Neville was still in his great-uncle's office.

"...so close..."

"No!" Harry yelled, taking a right at the top of the stairs. Rushing down the hallway, he stopped down the hall from the Ethics

classroom. Reaching into the illusionary wall, he pulled back the lever, revealing the secret passage connecting to the East Corridor. He jumped through the newly revealed passage, withdrawing his wand. With a quick, gasped incantation, the tip lit, pushing back the darkness.

Taking a right, he sprinted down the narrow corridor, his shoulders scraping against the walls. Coming up to a 'T' intersection, he planted his right foot, to swing a left. As he did, his foot squished down on something, causing his foot to slide. Bereft of traction, he tumbled into the wall, hitting it shoulder first, sending a flare of pain through his right side.

"Fuck!" he yelled, before shaking his head slightly. Ignoring the pain, he took off running again, treading more carefully. Large spiders dotted the dusty floor, eight legs scrambling against the stone.

Harry didn't know, nor care, why the spiders had chosen this particular hallway for a convention, only that they were in his way.

"...I smell blood!"

Cursing, he picked up the pace. The splat of bursting spider bodies met his ears as he trampled through the arachnids.

Reaching the end of the hall, he lowered his shoulder, bursting through the purple and gold tapestry that hid the secret passage from the East Corridor side. Taking a quick right, he resumed his sprint, his lungs burning.

Up ahead the curved, ornate mirror loomed. Slowing slightly to take the corner, Harry gazed deep into the mirror's depth. At once, he slowed to a stop, the breath pushed from his lungs.

He was too late.

Two months ago, in nearly the exact same spot, Harry, Tracey and Millicent had stopped Cormac McLaggen from picking on two first-year Slytherins.

Now, face-up, his mouth frozen in a scream, his large, wiry body stiff, Cormac lay.

Though the large Gryffindor's fate was certainly a tragedy, he couldn't help but feel a small bit of relief that it wasn't Neville lying there on the floor.

More disturbing to him, however, was the sliver of satisfaction he felt, that if being petrified were to happen to anyone, he was glad it had happened to this idiot. That he had actually...well, deserved it.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

His head down, Harry paced the Headmaster's Office ceaselessly, unable to stand still. Upon informing Dumbledore of yet another attack, he had immediately risen from his desk, imploring Harry to stay put.

As instructed, he had remained in the office; his only company the constantly hissing, thrumming and whirring objects of unknown design which cluttered the shelves. The portraits had woken upon his arrival, but had retreated to slumber as soon as the Headmaster had departed.

With no one to speak to, his thoughts had turned inward, towards the future. Though innocent of Cormac's petrification, it was no secret that he and the Gryffindor were enemies. During dinner a few hours earlier, the main topic of discussion ringing through the Great Hall had been Cormac and Dean's actions. By dinner's end, much to his annoyance, nearly everyone had heard the story. How was the attack on Cormac not going to look like revenge to the rest of the school? And how bad would the backlash be once classes resumed tomorrow?

That was, assuming they even allowed him to stay here.

Harry shook his head at the invasive thought. Stupid. Even if he was the Dark wizard the majority of the school thought him to be, magic of this type was certainly beyond his skills. They would have to see that it would have been impossible to achieve.

Right?

No longer certain, he was spared further introspection by the grinding of the spiral staircase.

"I didn't do it!" Harry blurted out, more loudly than intended.

Dumbledore, looking as if he had undertaken nothing more taxing than a stroll in the park, appraised him through his half-moon spectacles.

"I agree completely. Please," he urged, motioning towards a chair opposite his desk with a gnarled hand, "have a seat, Harry."

Feeling slightly relieved by Dumbledore's serene, relaxed disposition, Harry took a seat.

"Can I interest you in a lemon drop?" the Headmaster asked, holding out a bowl filled with the yellow hard candy. Taking one with a word of thanks, Harry popped one into his mouth, savoring the lemon sweet. Dumbledore took one for himself, before sitting down and regarding Harry with an unreadable gaze.

"While I believe you had nothing to do with Mister McLaggen's unfortunate state," he began, "that is now two times that you have found a petrified student, which strongly suggests that mere coincidence can be eliminated as a possibility."

Harry winced internally at Dumbledore's implied question, as it dug closer to a truth he'd rather not disclose. He had no doubt that the voice he heard was real, but the fact that no one else could hear them was...concerning, to say the least. It seemed that he was connected to them somehow, which was frankly really fucking scary.

"Please understand," Dumbledore continued, well aware of Harry's reticence, "my only interest in this matter is preventing harm from befalling any more of my students."

Harry nodded slightly at the unspoken agreement. Taking a deep breath, he decided to trust the Headmaster.

"A voice always leads me there," he said quietly, eyes downcast. "A voice...only I can hear."

Dumbledore inclined his head a fraction of an inch, but otherwise gave no other indication that he found Harry's words strange.

"What do they say?"

"Well...it's...it talks about being hungry, hunting, smelling blood...it's not human."

"What leads you to that conclusion?" Dumbledore asked, raising his eyebrows.

"It...it doesn't talk like a person," Harry said, struggling to find the right words. "It's only simple words...like if a shark could talk, it's what it would sound like."

"That is indeed interesting," commented Dumbledore, but the Headmaster had no further insight to add. After a few lengthy moments of silence, Harry hesitantly broached one of his wilder fears.

"There's a lot of rumors going around the school about the Heir of Slytherin."

"Indeed there are," the Headmaster agreed, inclining his head, "and sad to say, precious few are based in reality."

"Yeah, I guess so, but...is there any chance that I am?"

For a fraction of a second, Dumbledore's bright blue eyes widened, before he shook his head authoritatively.

"Absolutely not, Harry."

"How can we be sure?" he asked insistently, leaning forward in the chair. "I already know I'm a Parselmouth, the last once since Voldemort. What if it's like last year, and parts of my memory are being erased?"

"Harry..." the Headmaster began sadly, letting out a deep sigh, "I have supreme confidence in the quality of your character, and have no reason to suspect either you, or your unique talent are culpable in these matters."

"But how would you know?" demanded Harry loudly.

"There is a historical precedence at hand," Dumbledore explained, his voice grave.

"Fifty years ago?"

Dumbledore nodded in confirmation.

"Following several petrifications, a young girl tragically lost her life."

"Did you ever find out who opened the Chamber of Secrets?"

The Headmaster leaned back in his chair slightly, steeping his fingers, considering Harry's question.

"Officially," Dumbledore finally answered, "a well-respected Prefect discovered that another student had been keeping a dangerous pet, which was blamed for the attacks. The student was subsequently expelled, his wand snapped, and the attacks seemed to stop."

"Unofficially?"

Dumbledore let out a heavy sigh.

"The Prefect who was honored for stopping the attacks was none other than Tom Riddle."

"Voldemort!" Harry exclaimed.

"Correct. I had always had my reasons for mistrusting young Tom Riddle, but the Headmaster at the time, along with most of my colleagues, were entranced with the promising young student, who most thought would eventually become the next Minister of Magic. I strongly believe that Riddle did truly discover the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets, and unleashed the horror within described by legend."

"Have you tried to find the entrance?"

"I have," Dumbledore admitted, inclining his head slightly, "but success has eluded me. Whichever means it is hidden by, they remain outside my grasp."

"But..." Harry began, his voice uncertain, "Riddle would have been...sixteen, right?"

The Headmaster nodded a single time.

"Young Tom Riddle was an unnaturally intelligent, gifted wizard. I suspect that even by the age of thirteen, he had begun trafficking in obscure branches of the Dark Arts."

"So," concluded Harry, "he's probably the only one who could open the Chamber, right?"

Dumbledore regarded Harry silently for a moment.

"Several of the other professors and I updated the Hogwarts wards this summer," Dumbledore carefully explained. "The vast amount of dark magic contained within Voldemort's wraith form would be unable to pass through the wards."

"Well, then what opened the Chamber?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," Dumbledore answered, his tone grave.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Having finished the day's reading, Harry closed the history book with a yawn. Before anyone would even let him do anything magical, Callie and Corwin had said he needed to learn all about magic.

Magical Theory. The Standard Book of Spells Grade One. Herbs and Magical Fungi. A Beginner's Guide to Transfiguration.

Sure, it was fun and all to read about magic, but when was he actually going to be able to perform some? Crowley had said he'd already be working on it by now!

Pouting slightly, Harry wandered downstairs to see if supper was ready. Tonight was Wednesday, so that meant...Corwin was cooking! He was the best!

Rushing down the steps, Harry turned the corner and went into the kitchen. Corwin, a knife held in his hand, was quickly slicing something up on the counter, out of Harry's sight.

"What's for dinner?"

"Good afternoon, Harry," Corwin greeted with a kind smile, putting down the knife. "How go your studies?"

"Boring," he replied, rolling his eyes.

"Boring? So you find magic boring? My, then we better not teach you any!"

"No!" Harry whined, stomping his right foot down. "I just don't want to read anymore."

Corwin let out a small chuckle.

"I know, it can get boring, but it's something we all have to do. One shouldn't begin to use magic unless they understand it..."

Corwin trailed off, before staring out into space, looking at nothing.

"No, it can't be," he whispered, before slumping against the counter.

"What's wrong?"

"Harry, I need you to get Crowley," Corwin gasped from between teeth gritted tightly together, the veins on his forehead and neck bulging.

"Wh-wh-what's wr-"

"Get Crowley!" Corwin screamed, slumping to the floor. Panic beginning to take over, Harry fled from the kitchen, and sprinted up the stairs. He took a right at the end of the stairs, and fled to the end of the hall.

"Crowley!" Harry screamed, hitting the door as hard as he could, bringing tears of pain to his eyes. He had to help Corwin!

Almost immediately, the door was ripped open, revealing Crowley. Candlelight flickered behind him, reflecting off of his bald pate.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't know!" Harry wailed. "H-h-he w-was in the k-kitchen-"

Without preamble, Crowley fled down the hall, slamming his fist into several doors as he passed. He disappeared down the stairs as Callie, Sylvia and Richard emerged from their respective rooms, looking confused as he did.

"Harry, what's wrong?" Sylvia asked concernedly.

"I-I-I-I," Harry tried to explain, but was overcome by tears. Sylvia immediately scooped him up into her arms, and followed the other two people down the stairs.

"It's okay, Harry," Sylvia assured, running a hand through his hair as she descended the stairs. "I'm sure that..."

Her words died as she reached the first floor and turned the corner.

Crowley was knelt upon the white tile of the kitchen, flecks of red covering his clothes. Before him, flopping on the floor like a fish out of water was Corwin. His white shirt was stained with bright red, providing a stark contrast. Slashes crisscrossed his face and upper body. One eye rolled in its socket, while the other lay deflating upon his cheek, connected via a cord of red gristle.

"Callie, get over here!" Crowley loudly ordered, causing the woman to rush over to Crowley's side. As she arrived, the flesh on Corwin's upper arm began to peel back on its own accord, spilling even more blood onto the floor.

"We can't let it through!" Callie screamed, drawing forth her wand.

"Corwin?" Harry whispered, barely able to comprehend what was going on.

"What the fuck are you doing, Sylvia?" Richard yelled. "Get him out of here!"

At once, Sylvia obeyed, taking a wailing Harry back up the stairs.

He never saw Corwin again.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

January 29, 1993

Streaking through the air, cold biting at his face, Harry pushed the front of his broom downward, slipping him under the incoming projectile. Seeing movement to his right peripheral, he leaned hard to the right, allowing the second bludger to fly straight past him.

"Thirty seconds, Potter!"

Ignoring the yell, Harry righted himself, rocketing forward. Throwing his body to the right, he rode the broom sideways for a moment, letting the bludger fly past him. Stretching out with his fingertips, he grabbed the dark blue flag hanging off the uppermost of the three hoops, before holding it over his head as a simultaneous show of triumph and surrender.

"Great fuckin' work Potter!" Flint roared, flying and giving him a hearty slap on the back, which was nearly enough to dislodge Harry from the broom. Unconcerned with the force of his blow, Flint turned to the rest of the team below.

The rest of the Slytherin team formed two opposing lines, facing one another, a formation which Flint had dubbed the 'Corridor of Death'. Harry wasn't exactly thrilled with the Slytherin Captain's newest training brainstorm, but did have to admit the constant threat of death was a great motivational tactic.

"That's what I want to see!" Flint declared. "Six fuckin' people, and we still couldn't knock that little runt out of the sky."

"Close thing though," Harry muttered to himself, causing Flint to let out a bray of rough laughter.

"We've got the best Seeker in this soddin' school, and ye Beaters are hittin' the bludger like ye mean it. Even you, Bole, ye limp-wristed poof."

The team let out a chorus of laughter, while Bole stayed silent, a large, shit-eating grin upon his face. Bole probably wasn't too happy with being singled out, but the last time he had questioned Flint, it had ended with him unconscious under a cold shower.

"We're lookin' real good this year," Flint continued, eyeing each and every member of the team. "We should have won it last year, but

this year it's ours for the taking. I promise you, those librarian cunts in Ravenclaw don't stand a chance against us if we play our game.

Flint continued in the same manner for a few more minutes, before mercifully dismissing them, allowing them to hit the showers. Rushing out of the bitter cold, Harry found solace beneath hot streams of water, inducing a mild form of euphoria as the bone-deep chill began to depart.

After spending what seemed like hours in the shower, he quickly dried himself off and dressed, before making his way back towards the Slytherin Common Room. Though in some ways it was rather inconvenient to have a Quidditch Captain who insisted upon long practices five days a week after dinner, it did have the added benefit of keeping him busy, out of sight.

Following the discovery of Cormac's petrified body the school's general hostility had reached unparalleled heights. Aside from most of the Gryffindors, the Hufflepuffs and even some of the Ravenclaws had begun to shun him. While generally too fearful to attempt any sort of reprisal, lively conversations turned to silence when he passed by, to be replaced by hushed whispers. Even Dumbledore's assurances regarding his culpability did nothing to improve his standing.

Instead of trying to fight it, he just went with it. People this stupid just weren't worth arguing with. For nearly a month, he had merely kept his head down, mingling only with his small circle of friends. It was a more solitary existence than what he was used to, but at least it kept him from running afoul with the more hostile of the Gryffindors.

Granted, if asked, Flint probably would have attacked every single one of them for even thinking about attacking his Seeker. While tempted, Harry had opted not to send Flint after them.

Turning the corner, Harry stopped in his tracks. Stretching across the hall, in a long line, were five members of his least favorite House.

"Looks like we've found ourselves a lost snake," Seamus Finnegan taunted.

"Not really," Harry replied with a dismissive shrug. "After all, didn't you know the Slytherin dorms were in the dungeons?"

"Well, yeah, but..." Seamus began to sputter, before Dean cut him off.

"All by his lonesome, too," the large, dark-skinned boy said, drawing himself up to his full height.

Harry, giving no clue as to his unease, snorted with disdain.

"You lot think you'd really have a chance against me?" he asked incredulously, glancing down the line.

"Why not?" Parvati asked, withdrawing her wand.

"Yeah," Lavender echoed, drawing her own. "After all, we've got you outnumbered."

"Please," Harry replied, waving his wand dismissively. "Unless you, Parvati and Seamus' pathetic attempts in class these past two years have been a ploy, I don't think any of you could give me any trouble."

"Yes we could!" a small, blonde boy squeaked insistently, prompting Harry to snort laughter.

"Colin, why don't you go back to your dorms before you hurt yourself?" he suggested, while discreetly moving his hand towards his wand. If any of them decided to cast, he needed to be quick with a shield charm.

"Oh, no one has to get hurt here today," Dean said calmly. "We're just here to ask you a question."

"Well, I'm all ears."

"Well, it's been almost a month since you lost all your schoolbooks," Seamus said mildly, a cruel smile on his face. "We were wondering if you remembered the promise we gave you."

At mention of the incident, Harry's smile grew forced. Dean's betrayal, and subsequent destruction of his school materials, still raised his ire whenever mentioned.

Harry crossed his arms, resting his chin in his left hand for a moment, as if in deep thought. After a moment, he shrugged.

"You know, I just can't remember what it was. Maybe if you brought Cormac down, I could ask him what he wanted."

The effect was instantaneous. All of the Gryffindors save Dean all immediately lost their cool, and began to shout at him, all while raising their wands.

"No!" Dean ordered, quickly moving in front of them, arms raised wide. "All we're supposed to do is ask-"

Harry, wasting no time, withdrew his wand and thrust it forward.

"*Slugulus eructo!*"

His back turned, the green spell struck Dean in the back of his head. Before the light had even faded, the large Gryffindor had folded at the waist, retching violently.

"Dean!" Seamus yelled, bringing his own wand up. Harry, anticipating Seamus' reaction, slashed his own wand forward.

"*Expelliarmus!*"

The crimson spell impacted the sandy-haired Gryffindor before he could cast, blowing him backwards. Harry neatly caught the ash wand with his left hand and pointed it forward, focusing the tips of both wands at the remaining three Gryffindors.

"Any one else want to try to threaten me?" Harry asked harshly, his voice hard. Colin and Parvati immediately pointed the shaking tips of their wands downward, eyes downcast. Lavender threw her head from side to side, seeing her classmates' reaction. Cursing to herself, she followed their example.

"Much better," Harry said.

"You won't get away with this, Potter!" Seamus shouted while struggling to his feet.

"Finnegan, if you don't shut up, you're going to find out what the Dark Arts are truly capable of."

Hearing the truth in the words, Seamus closed his mouth mid-retort. In a way, it was almost disappointing. He almost wanted to demonstrate to the idiotic Gryffindor exactly what Regina had been teaching him.

Hearing a splat to his right, Harry saw a large, repulsive slug burst upon the ground. Dean, having since fallen to his knees, found his winter robes splattered with sickly green slug innards. The boy's large, watery eyes, mired in humiliation, glared at him for a moment, before bending over to vomit forth another slug.

"Please don't kill us!" Colin begged, clasping his hands in front of us.

"I'm not going to kill you," Harry spat back disgustedly, "but I am completely fucking sick of you lot. I've tried talking with you, reasoning with you, but apparently you're all too stupid to reason with. So, I'm going to make it real simple for you: You stay away from me, you'll be fine. You bother me, I hurt you. Understood?"

The remaining Gryffindors stayed silent, their gazes glued to the floor. Out of patience, Harry raised his wand towards the ceiling, letting out a whisper.

"Sonitus."

At his words, a loud gunshot rang out from his wand. All of the Gryffindors jumped in place, while Colin let out a shriek of terror.

"I asked you a question."

At once, the three Gryffindors nodded quickly. Harry wasn't pleased with their response, but didn't find it worth the effort to extract a 'yes' from them.

"Good," Harry said, before motioning towards the exit to the dungeons. "Now get out of my sight."

At once the Gryffindors fled, tails between their legs, each throwing back one final glance of hatred before disappearing from sight. Dean,

slime smeared down the front of his robes, all dignity torn to shreds, was the last to leave.

"Dean!" Harry shouted, before the boy could leave the hallway. Almost reluctantly, the Gryffindor turned, his features contorted in discomfort.

"You can tell Ron he should do his own dirty-work next time. His henchmen aren't really up to snuff. Oh, and, I'm not fucking going anywhere. You can tell him that too."

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

'How hard would it be to actually heat these halls?' Harry thought to himself, blowing out an icy plume of breath. From November to early March, just the simple act of switching classes could become an exercise in endurance, let alone trudging from the pitch all the way to the dungeons.

Being the final practice before tomorrow's match with Ravenclaw, Flint had drove them hard, despite bitter cold and scattered flurries, deep into the night. Unbelievably, the clock on the wall of the locker room had read half-past eight before he had left it.

Marcus Flint was not a believer in giving his players a day off before a match.

Hoping to get at least some sleep before tomorrow's game, he descended a flight of stairs, bringing him face-to-face with two familiar faces.

"Good evening, my Lord," Fred Weasley said, bowing slightly.

"Ah, our esteemed Heir of Slytherin! How goes it on this fine night?" George asked.

"What are you doing here?" Harry asked warily. The twins had never really given him a problem, but save for his closest friends, he had developed a healthy mistrust of anyone from Gryffindor.

"What?" Fred asked innocently, beginning to whistle.

"Indeed," George added, adopting a bemused expression. "Is it not a fine night for a leisurely stroll about these frigid dungeons?"

Slightly mollified, Harry let out a small chuckle.

"No, you're right, great night for a walk. What can I do for you two gentlemen?"

"Gentlemen? Clearly this child has heard nothing of our conquests, Fred."

"Sadly, it would appear so. Perhaps this is a sign that we should step up our game a little?"

"Unquestionably. Anyway, Harry, we couldn't help but overhear what happened last night between you and a few of our more brain-cell challenged brethren."

Harry shrugged unconcernedly.

"It was self-defense."

"They won't see it that way though," Fred pointed out.

"I couldn't care less. I've already talked to you two about it. Your brother still has Gryffindor convinced I'm the Heir of Slytherin, they're still going after me, and I'm getting really sick of it all. I'm through taking any of their shite."

Both twins stayed silent as his voice rose gradually over the course of the rant, letting him have his say. Following it, George let out a heavy sigh.

"I told you it would come to this a few months ago," Harry continued.

"Yeah, we noticed," Fred snapped back, clearly frustrated. "It's not like we haven't tried to stop it."

"Stop what?" Harry asked incredulously. "It's your brother that's causing all of this! Stop him and it ends!"

"Ron won't stop," George admitted, his voice low. "It's turned into a crusade."

"At least he says it is," Fred countered, drawing a dark look from his twin.

"What do you know?" Harry asked, staring at Fred, who let out a deep sigh.

"Nothing about this makes any sense. Ron, he's...he's not our brother anymore. He's passed the point of reason."

"He's been through a lot," George hesitantly pointed out.

"That doesn't explain it," Fred insisted, shaking his head. "No one, absolutely no one would continue to blame Harry for all these things. It's like there's something deeper going on here. The speeches, the charisma, the disappearances...George, how in the bloody hell do you explain those?"

"Wait, what disappearances?" Harry asked.

"Never mind," George shot back. "The real reason we wanted to talk to you is that soon, in the first week of February, the date to their ultimatum is going to strike. We don't know if it will be that day, but they are going to make a move."

Harry shook his head.

"They know what will happen if they try to ambush me again."

"They mean business, Harry. Whatever it is, it's going to be well-planned."

"Then why not go straight to McGonagall?" Harry asked, beginning to get frustrated. "She is your Head of House, right?"

The twins exchanged glances, something unsaid passing between the two.

"Harry," began George slowly, "look at it from the outside. Aside from a few slip-ups early in the year, they haven't actually done anything wrong, or been caught. Anything we can say, they can deny."

"And have," Fred added darkly. "I hate to say this, but you're on your own on this one. If we find anything, we'll let you know, but...just keep your eyes open, okay?"

"Oh, I plan on it," Harry replied coldly.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

The match against Ravenclaw turned out to be one of the most unpleasant of Harry's fledgling quidditch career. Played in white-out conditions, complemented by hurricane-force winds, it was not exactly the ideal conditions for a match. The crowd, possessed of anti-Slytherin sentiment, was all but taken out of the game by the howling wind. Even Lee Jordan struggled to make himself heard.

With the high-velocity winds affecting quaffle movement, it became a defensive struggle, points few and far between. Only Harry's lucky catch of the snitch forty-five minutes into match saved them all from severe frostbite.

Following his nearly numb body being nearly carried all the way to the Slytherin dorms for a raucous celebration of victory, Harry had managed to slip away to the showers, spending a good hour under the hot streams of water.

Thankfully, Sunday was much more peaceful, allowing Harry and his friends to spend some quiet downtime in the library.

"I still can't believe they held the match in that type of weather," Hermione said, shaking her head.

"Wizards are crazy about the sport," Tracey said with a shrug. "At least they stop football matches if there's lightning."

"It just seems like such a stupid reason to risk the health of students," Hermione said, blowing a wisp of hair away from her face.

Tracey shook her head.

"Not to them, at least not with their medical skills. They can fix broken bones in days, and have potions for everything. Maybe they think there's no risk."

"Of course there's a risk! If someone falls from their broom and breaks their neck, what good is magic doing to do them?"

"That's probably why everyone has to take flying lessons," Harry added. "Anyway, there's always professors at matches. If someone fell from their broom, I'm pretty sure that Dumbledore would be able to save them."

"Well...yes, I suppose so," Hermione conceded as she let out a shiver, before drawing her scarf more tightly around her.

"Wonder if Yaxley has any of that butterbeer left?" Millicent wondered aloud, fondly recalling the previous night's celebration.

"Wait, the Prefects allowed you to have it too?" Hermione asked, her tone scandalized.

"Yeah, it's just butterbeer," Millicent replied with a shrug. "It's not like we were doing shots of firewhiskey."

"That's what the Gryffindor prefects said."

"But Gryffindor didn't even play yesterday," Harry pointed out, leaning forward.

Hermione shook her head.

"They took Slytherin's victory yesterday like a Gryffindor loss. These used the butterbeer to 'cheer themselves up', or at least that's the excuse they used."

"So how'd you like it?" Tracey asked with a grin.

Hermione wrinkled her nose.

"Please, that'd be terribly irresponsible of me."

"Did they even offer you one?" Millicent asked, prompting Hermione to frown slightly.

"Neville and myself aren't exactly popular in Gryffindor. Even though Fred and George did go out of their way to offer us some, it wouldn't have been fun for Neville to drink it with the other Gryffindors."

"Did the twins provide the butterbeer?"

Hermione shrugged.

"Probably. By the time we got back to Gryffindor Tower, most of the bottles had already been passed around."

"You know," Tracey said, leaning back in her chair, "I'm not sure that butterbeer even really has any alcohol in it. I've heard some of the third-years buying it at Hogsmeade without a problem."

"Butter-beer," Hermione replied, putting the emphasis on the last word.

"Well, maybe butterbeer came first," Tracey argued. "What if muggle beer was the closest a squib could come to copying butterbeer?"

"If that's true, they didn't really come close," Harry said with a grin, prompting a laugh from his friends.

Before the laughter had trickled away, the library door was thrown wide open. A harried-looking Neville rushed through, approaching their corner-table at a run.

"What's wrong?" Millicent asked.

"T-they took...Hagrid," Neville wheezed out, clearly out of breath.

"What happened?" Hermione demanded.

Slowly regaining his breath, Neville pulled out a chair from the table and sat down heavily.

"I just heard it from Uncle Algie. The Hit-Wizards came last night, and arrested Hagrid. They think he had something to do with the attacks!"

"That's ridiculous!" Hermione declared, drawing a harsh glare from Madam Pince. "How could they suspect Hagrid?" she continued, lowering her voice.

"I don't know," Neville answered, shaking her head. "All my uncle would say is that he was their only suspect, and the Minister was being pressured into doing something."

"Why would they think it's Hagrid, though?"

"You do know that the Ministry doesn't like giants, right?" Millicent asked.

Tracey shook her head, for once in agreement with Hermione.

"Doesn't matter, though. The type of magic being used to petrify people...well, it's really Dark stuff. Even if the Ministry is prejudiced against giants, there's no way they'd be able to prove Hagrid was using Dark magic."

"It's pure laziness," Harry spat. "They're just going after someone they can easily pin the blame on."

"What do you mean?" Tracey asked, turning towards him.

Sighing, Harry began to relay the details of his conversation with Dumbledore to an enrapt audience, although only after promising to keep the details to themselves. While he didn't want to break his word to the Headmaster, he felt it far more important that they be informed of what was going on.

Upon finishing, his friends sat around in stunned silence, with Hermione being the first to break it.

"Does Dumbledore now think that Filch was the real first victim?"

Harry nodded.

"I think he does, but...why was Filch killed, and the students petrified?"

"It doesn't make sense," Tracey agreed, shaking her head. "When the mandrakes are ready, the students will be able to name who attacked them. Why kill Filch, but not them?"

At once, Hermione reached into her book bag, and withdrew an empty sheaf of parchment. Looking down, she directly her quill into a inkwell, before looking back up at Harry.

"We've got to prove that Hagrid is innocent. Harry, tell me every detail you remember from following the voice."

With a slight nod, Harry sat back, and began to go through each episode in his head, analyzing and dredging up every detail he could.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

February 4, 1993

One month to the day removed from Dean and Cormac's ultimatum, Harry emerged from the second-year boys' room to find Millicent and Tracey waiting for him, ready to go.

"I guess I'm going to have an escort today," Harry said lightly, a small smile stretching across his lips.

"Indeed," Tracey replied, "whether you like it or not."

Harry held out his hands in front of him.

"Believe me, I'm grateful. Who knows what stupid idea the Gryffindors have in mind for today? Really, thanks a lot guys."

"You're welcome," Millicent said with a fond grin, clearly relieved Harry wasn't going to fight her on the subject. With that, they descended down to breakfast.

Though on the surface things appeared to be normal, there was an undercurrent of tension beneath even the mundane act of breakfast. Conversation was stilted, while all laughter seemed strained, even forced.

Halfway through breakfast, without preamble, Flint shouldered aside Blaise, and sat next to Harry, slapping a piece of parchment down on the table.

"Your class schedule, Potter. Write it down."

"What for?" Harry asked, picking up the quill.

Flint let out a snort of disdain.

"Ye fuckin' daft, Potter? Ye think I'm lettin' ye walk 'round with eh target on ye back?"

"Oh," Harry replied, reddening slightly. "What's your plan?"

"After ever class, ye make damn sure yer the last person out. I'll 'ave someone from our House outside. They'll follow ye to yer next class, make sure none of them Gryffindor twats fuck with ye."

"Oh, uh...thanks," Harry said, quickly writing down his class schedule.

"Don't mention it," Flint carelessly replied, before taking back the bit of parchment and making his way back towards the other end of the table.

"Can you imagine what he'd do to anyone who tried to attack you in front of him?" Millicent asked, shaking her head.

Tracey let out a small laugh.

"You know, I almost hope one of them does. It'd be great to see Flint dismember them."

Chuckling, Harry couldn't help but agree with Tracey's assessment.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Though the school day was admittedly tense, leading up to his final class of the day, Defense Against the Dark Arts, the most threatening encounter he'd had were the countless glares of dislike he received.

As promised, he noticed an older Slytherin shadowing him between every class, their eyes ever watchful. Peter Yaxley, who followed him to the Defense classroom, gave him a curt nod before turning in the other direction, and disappearing into the crowd.

Taking a seat at the back of the classroom, Defense Against the Dark Arts began. To Harry's surprise, Lockhart had slightly dark circles beneath his eyes. His normally pristine blonde hair was slightly frizzed, as if Lockhart hadn't given his appearance the normally high level of attention it received. It was subtle, but it suggested that perhaps Lockhart hadn't the time to devote to his looks, or that he wasn't sleeping.

Perhaps even both.

"Good afternoon, class," Lockhart began, his tone far less boisterous than normal, his having lost some of its luster, giving it a forced edge.

"What's wrong with him?" Tracey whispered, to which Harry could only shrug.

"Today, as I'm feeling a bit under the weather, I want you to read silently for the rest of class."

"Uh, which book?" Daphne asked, raising her hand.

Surprisingly, Lockhart looked as if he was at a loss for words, as if completely blindsided by the question.

"Gadding with Ghouls, I suppose," Lockhart finally said, before sitting at his desk, and beginning to shuffle through papers.

Slightly unsettled by Lockhart's behavior, Harry withdrew his new copy of Gadding with Ghouls, and began to write wand movements down in the margins, steadfastly refusing to fill his mind with Lockhart's writings.

Tracey merely placed her Potions book inside Lockhart's, while Millicent merely doodled on the inside margins, occasionally flipping the page.

Over the course of the class, Harry occasionally glanced upwards from his text, watching Lockhart. While Lockhart was making a good show of it, he was slowly but surely shuffling through the same papers over and over, as opposed to finishing correcting the current stack and moving on.

What was Lockhart playing at?

After about an hour, twenty minutes shy of the scheduled end of class, Lockhart rose from his desk.

"That will be all for today, class."

Without further adieu, Lockhart practically fled the class, retreating back up the steps which led to his office.

"That's it?" Blaise asked incredulously, looking around at his classmates. Nott shrugged, before rising and leaving the room with comment.

"Well, I'm sure if you asked nicely, he'd still be willing to give you an autograph," Daphne deadpanned.

"I think I'm all set," Blaise said, getting up from his seat. "Don't know about you guys, but if Lockhart wants to let us out early, I'm definitely taking advantage of it."

"Good point," Daphne said, rising from her seat. "See you guys at dinner?"

"Yeah, we'll catch you later," Millicent replied.

As soon as Blaise and Daphne had left the room, Tracey turned to Harry.

"Regina isn't going to expecting us for another fifteen minutes, at least. I'm thinking we should wait in here until Regina shows up."

"Definitely," Millicent agreed with a nod.

"Um, but if the Gryffindors were planning anything between class, wouldn't their timeline be thrown off as well?" Harry asked.

"Maybe," Tracey conceded with a shrug, "but that would still leave Regina in the dark. You think Flint would be happy if Regina told him she couldn't find you anywhere?"

"Point taken."

Millicent appeared to start to say something, but the opening of the classroom door stopped her.

The tall, dark form of Dean Thomas walked through the door, wand out, pointed at the floor.

"What did I tell you, Thomas?" Harry asked coldly, pulling his own wand from his robes.

"We gave you a month, Potter," Seamus smirked, following his friend through the door. "What's it going to-"

"Experliarmus!"

"Protego!"

Harry's quick disarmer shattered against Dean's weak shield in a shower of sparks, sending the tall boy reeling against the wall. Seamus, fumbling with his wand, got clipped by Tracey's body-bind, sending him to the floor in an ungraceful thud.

Whipping his wand forward, Harry flung another disarmer. The crimson spell struck Dean in the chest, knocking him back against the wall. Neatly catching Dean's wand, Harry ran forward. Grasping Dean by the front of his robes, he swung the boy around, sending him tumbling to the floor.

"What did I say, Thomas?" Harry asked menacingly, his wand pointed down at Dean's prone form.

"Potter, what are you doing? Get away from him!"

Turning, lowering his wand, Harry saw Lockhart emerge from his office, his face pale.

"It was self-defense, Prof-" Millicent began, only to be cut off by the Defense instructor.

"Mister Potter, I'm disappointed in you. While a little mischief is nothing to be alarmed over, I'm afraid the taste of fame I've given you has gone to your head. Detention, tonight. Be at my office at eight."

Resisting the urge to kick the prone Gryffindor, Harry threw Dean's wand to the ground, before storming out of the classroom, Tracey and Millicent hot on his heels.

This was Ron's master plan?

Either his minions couldn't carry out orders, or Weasley was seriously running low on ideas.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Nearly oblivious to the chill of Hogwarts by night, Harry made his way towards the Defense classroom, his thoughts turbulent.

Far different from his experience with Dean, the twins merely seemed to be misinformed. They got the timeframe right, but as for the attack itself...

To say it was lacking something was an understatement. It was idiotic, lazy, entirely without any foresight. There was no chance it was going to work.

What was the point?

Shaking his head, Harry entered into the Defense classroom, wondering what horrors Lockhart had in store for him. Reflecting upon the incident earlier, he couldn't really blame Lockhart for assigning the detention. Based upon what he had seen...well, it made sense.

Taking a deep breath, he knocked upon the door of Lockhart's Office, which had been left slightly ajar.

"Come in," a muffled voice from within implored. Harry did as instructed. Upon entering, he did a quick double-take around the unfamiliar room.

Framed photographs of Lockhart in various types of wardrobe lined the side walls of the office. In every picture, his brilliant smile was front and center. Upon the far wall, a large bookcase stood, filled to the brim with multiple copies of each of his books. A large pile of smiling photographs were stacked atop his desk.

"Please, have a seat," Lockhart offered, motioning towards the seat opposite him.

Stifling a laugh, Harry did as asked, taking a seat. How could someone be so in love with themselves?

"I'm sorry it ever came to this point," Lockhart said, uncharacteristic sincerity in his voice.

"Sorry about what?"

"Well, Harry, I feel that we really got off on the wrong foot. Sadly, it appears that you were ill-prepared to handle fame."

"What are you talking about?" Harry asked, incredulously. "You tried to exploit me, use me to help your own career."

"Harry, Harry," Lockhart replied, shaking his head sadly. "What possible reason could I have for exploiting you? I assure, between my Order of Merlins and my regular appearances in the Daily Prophet, my career was not in any danger."

"Really?" Harry asked, rolling his eyes. "Then why take a position here? Do you really expect me to believe that the headlines you'd get for taking this position had nothing to do with it?"

Lockhart shook his head, a sympathetic smile upon his face, as if he was relaying a concept too grand for Harry to understand.

"I merely wished to pass my knowledge down onto the next generation of wizards and witches."

"What knowledge? Professor, you couldn't even deal with Cornish Pixies! How could we respect you if we had never seen you actually perform any magic? A squib could have taught your class just as well!"

Lockhart's smile lost some of its vitality, morphing into a grimace.

"Is that why you had Algernon Longbottom looking into my affairs, Harry? You think there are better instructors out there?"

Oh fuck. Who tipped him off?

Struggling to regain his composure, Harry managed to keep his voice even.

"Professor, you threatened me. With all your contacts at the Prophet, you could have easily followed through on your threat to leak information to the Prophet."

Lockhart, as if he had not heard him, continued on.

"You know, Dumbledore had quite the difficult time filling this position. Some would even say that I did him a favor in accepting it. I will not let Longbottom, or you, take this from me."

Harry reacted immediately, drawing his wand and pointing it at the Professor.

"Too bad you can't stop me," he replied, rising and backing towards the door. "I'm a little more dangerous than a Cornish Pixie."

His back striking the door, Harry slid his hand down, reaching for the handle. Oddly, Lockhart was making no move to stop him.

"Oh, I don't know about that," Lockhart said casually, rising to his feet.

Finding the handle, Harry pushed down, and threw his weight backwards into the door.

It didn't budge.

"Locked, isn't it," the Defense instructor said with a superior smirk. "Too bad you don't have the key."

Keeping his cool, Harry pointed his wand directly at Lockhart's heart.

"We both know I'm far more talented than you, Lockhart. Why don't you just give me the key?"

Lockhart let out a small laugh.

"You, a mere second-year, think that you're more talented than me? Please, Harry, if I had wanted a mundane career, I would have

settled for being Head of the Obliviators. My Memory Charms are without peer."

"So you admit to stealing the work of others?" Harry sneered.

Lockhart shot him a look of loathing.

"Would anyone have cared if some ugly old Armenian warlock saved a village from a pack of werewolves? He'd have looked dreadful on the front cover! No fashion sense, either. No, I made their minor victories into achievements that people will remember hundreds of years from now."

Harry let out a mocking laugh.

"You're delusional. In ten years, no one will remember your name."

"If I were you, I'd be more concerned about your memories, Harry. Do you really think I'd let some pre-teen put an end to my career?"

"I don't think you have a choice," Harry said, jabbing his wand forward. "Stupefy!"

The crimson jet of light leapt from his wand, streaking toward Lockhart, who made no movements to avoid the spell. Before Harry could begin to process how, the spell disintegrated into thin air.

Harry could only stare, open-mouthed, as his curse vanished. What the fuck?

Lockhart let out a hearty chuckle.

"And I thought you were clever, Harry. To acquire the information for my books, I had to Memory Charm some of the most powerful witches and wizards in the world. Surely you expected me to have some sort of insurance policy?"

His blood running cold, Harry could only stare as Lockhart reached down into the first drawer in his desk, withdrawing an open wooden box, a foot wide. Inside, nestled into a scarlet velvet lining, was a black, polished sphere.

"This, Harry, is the secret to my success. Soaked in the blood of the user for days on end, it bonds to them, protecting them from any harmful spells. Rather cumbersome to lug around, but kept inside a book-bag, close by, it does the trick."

Harry, internally beginning to panic, gazed at the obsidian sphere, desperately trying to think of a way around it.

"That's sad, Lockhart, that you need to use Dark artifacts."

Lockhart smiled wide at his accusation.

"As you're clearly aware, I am not a skill fighter. I merely use whatever tools are at my disposal."

"Like selling your soul," Harry scoffed, trying to buy time to think. "I used to think you sold your soul for fame; now I know I was more right than I knew."

"Oh, Harry," Lockhart said, letting out a chuckle. "You're too young to understand now, but there is nothing worse in life than being a 'nobody'. Floating through life without making any mark on the world, to be forgotten once you're gone...no sane person would ever accept that."

"Nobody? You're worse than a nobody. You think you can keep this up forever? Anyone who's learned from you knows you're a fraud."

"To a select few, perhaps," Lockhart conceded, "but as long as the loudest voices are silenced, the truth will stay buried."

"Is that what happened to Katelyn Wellington? What you're going to do to me?"

Lockhart's smile faded for a moment, his expression becoming troubled.

"That was an unfortunate situation which spiraled out of control, before I had mastered Memory Charms. If too much power is poured into one, there is a danger of wiping someone's mind completely clean. Sadly, I cannot have you-"

"Accio Magical Me!"

Harry's quick spell cut off Lockhart mid-sentence, causing one of the thick hardcover tomes to fly off the shelf, and strike him in the shoulder. The impact knocked Lockhart forward slightly, eliciting a groan of pain.

"Accio Gadding with Ghouls!"

Another tome flew off the shelf, striking the already stunned professor in the back, causing him to let out another cry of pain as he fumbled for his wand.

"Accio Magical Me!"

At his spell, Lockhart ducked down, the thick, heavy tome barely missing his head. Harry barely had time to blink before the hardcover smashed into his chest with a dull crack. A great pain exploded forth from Harry's chest as he was knocked to the floor. His head collided painfully off the hardwood floor, bringing his teeth together with a loud clack.

Gasping for air, he saw Lockhart rise, his teeth pulled back in a feral snarl, his wand raised.

"Obliviate!"

The grey spell bearing down upon him, Harry, ignoring the pain in his chest, brought up his own wand.

"Protego!"

The hastily produced, weak shield, shattered upon contact with the memory charm in an arc of magical discharge. Undeterred, Lockhart fired off another Obliviate.

Rising to a sitting position, Harry responded with a stronger shield. Lockhart's memory charm bounced off the curved crimson shield, detonating against the ceiling in a spray of stone chips. Keeping the shield active, Harry shakily rose to his feet, every breath painful.

"Obliviate!"

Slightly twisting his wand, Lockhart's spell bounced off the front of Harry's curved shield, flying right back at the caster. His blue eyes wide with fear, Lockhart ducked down, his own spell flying over his head, destroying a few of the books directly behind him.

Bringing his wand across his body, Harry transfigured the floor ahead of him into ice, causing Lockhart to slip on the unsteady floor, his non-wand elbow hitting the ice with a loud crack.

"You can't do this, Potter!" Lockhart screamed, straining his vocal cords.

"Watch me," Harry grimly replied.

"Obliviate!"

Harry leapt into the air, neatly jumping over the Defense instructor's curse. He landed right as Lockhart pulled himself up, blonde hair astray.

"Obliv-"

"Pulsus!"

Harry's far more concise banisher struck the desk with a hollow bang, sending it rocketing forward. The desk struck both of Lockhart's knees with an almighty crack, eliciting a cry of anguish.

Already in motion, Harry jabbed his wand forward.

"Reducto!"

The crimson spell, having no ill-intent towards Lockhart, struck the obsidian sphere dead-center, punching right through it. Lockhart, his head thrown back in pain as he fell, never saw the black shrapnel shards racing towards his head.

Lockhart's chin was disintegrated in a crimson spray, before the deadly shards shattered his teeth, abruptly cutting off his screams. The professor finished his descent to the floor silently, landing with a dull thud upon the ice.

Harry, his mind frozen in horror, could only stare at the red stains and white flecks that littered the back half of the office. He waited, prayed, for some sort of sign that Lockhart was alive, but as the long seconds stretched out, he heard no movement from the other side of the desk. Gathering the remnants of his courage, he made his way around the desk.

Lockhart lay on the ground, face-up. Everything from the eyes down had been vaporized, leaving only a giant, bloody hole which took up most of his face. One eye, a piece of dark shrapnel embedded in it, lay open, forever blind, leaking a clear fluid from the deflated orb. The other rolled around in its socket, ceaselessly moving, unable to focus on anything.

Without warning, Lockhart's body began to spasm wildly, his feet kicking hard against the blood-streaked ice. Letting out a strangled cry, Harry pointed his wand at the Lockhart, hitting him with a body-bind.

The Defense instructor was in bad shape, but if the bleeding slowed, maybe he could...

Shaking his head, Harry took out the door with a quick blasting curse, before kicking through the remaining embers. Jumping the short flight of stairs, he took off at a sprint, ignoring the pain in his ribs, one thought echoing in his mind.

What had he done?

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Author Notes:

I know it's taken a while, but year two is finally beginning to ramp up towards the big finale I have planned. It's been a slow burn, but I think the chaotic events of the finale will be worth the slow burn. Only two, maybe three chapters left.

Sadly, one of the techs in my department left the company, leaving an already over-taxed department short. I fear that my writing time as of late will dwindle further. It might be a while before the next update.

As always, any comments or criticisms are welcome. Even a quick "I liked it" or "it sucked" would be appreciated. Any questions, ask away. I reply to every review I receive. The reviews I've received as of late have inspired me to use my limited free time to write, when all I wanted to do was relax.

Thanks to scaryisntit for his help in the planning process.

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Note: This is unbeta'd. Corrected version to come in a few days. I just didn't want to make any of my readers wait any longer.

Sitra Ahra

Twenty-Fourth Movement: Rejection and Raising Perdition Blaze

February 4, 1993

In a flash of fire, Harry appeared in the Hogwarts Infirmary, his fist tightly balled around Fawkes' crimson tail feathers. Opening his hand, Fawkes soared into the air. His golden eyes filled with a sorrow that seemed almost human, the phoenix let out a low, musical trill.

The icy numbness spreading across his mind receded at the brief song, temporarily bringing Harry a sort of mental reprieve.

"Thanks, Fawkes," Harry whispered.

Giving a final trill of farewell, sending his spirits soaring further, Fawkes disappeared in a ball of flame. Right before his departure, the door to Madam Pomfrey's office opened, revealing the exhausted-looking matron of Hogwarts. The bleary look in her eyes immediately vanished upon the sight of the phoenix, to be replaced with a deep concern.

"What happened, Mister Potter?"

Harry opened his mouth to speak, but no sound came forth. How was he supposed to explain he had just killed Professor Lockhart?

Giving a short, curt nod, the matron led Harry over to a bed on the far side of the Infirmary, motioning that he should sit as well. The numbness beginning to creep back in, Harry did as instructed.

"Now Mister Potter," Pomfrey began, withdrawing her wand, "I see that you're in shock, but I still need to examine you, so hold still."

Giving the barest of nods, Pomfrey knelt down, putting her wand inches away from Harry's feet. Whispering under her breath, she slowly moved her wand up Harry's body. Upon reaching his chest, a silver radiance bloomed forth from his chest, before fading away.

Finishing her examination without further incident, Pomfrey lowered her wand, shaking her head slightly.

"Well, Mister Potter, it's clear that you have three cracked ribs, but I can't tell if you've sustained any spell damage. What I do know, however, is that Dumbledore wouldn't have had Fawkes bring you here unless there was something seriously wrong. I'm not here to judge you, but I can only help if I know exactly what happened to you."

"I..." Harry began, only to stop as he let out a small, choked sob. How could she understand what had just happened?

"Harry, it's okay," she insisted, laying a hand upon his arm and squeezing. "Forget what I just said, all I need to know is if you were hit with any spells or jinxes."

Harry shook his head vehemently, which seemed to mollify the matron somewhat. She opened her mouth to speak again, but her attention was stolen by the opening of the Infirmary door.

Lockhart, lying down, levitated a foot off the floor, floated through. His body, frozen stiff, looked exactly as Harry had left it.

Dumbledore, wand extended, entered next, his eyebrows arched, an almost alien expression of rage splashed across his features. Wordlessly, he moved Lockhart over to the other side of the Infirmary, far away from Harry. As he floated, minute drops of blood rolled off his body and splattered upon the floor, leaving a trail.

For a moment, Pomfrey could only stare in horror at the remains of Lockhart's shattered face, before instinct took over. She met Dumbledore at the bed, whispering to Dumbledore in harsh tones.

"Why didn't you have Fawkes bring him here? In this state, transporting him-"

"Fawkes refused," Dumbledore said softly, cutting across the matron's reprimand. Her eyes widened at the implications, before hardening. At once, she cut back towards Harry, briefly stopping at a cabinet. Whipping open the door, she deftly plucked a small vial

from the shelf, before rushing back towards Harry. Without explanation, she thrust it into Harry's hands.

"Drink," she ordered.

Harry took a quick glance at the purple potion, before movement to his left caught his eye. Like a fish out of water, Lockhart began to thrash, sending beads of blood flying from his ruined face. His arms and legs kicked up and down for a short moment, before falling completely still.

"Drink, Mister Potter," Madam Pomfrey reiterated, her voice brooking no argument. "You need deep, uninterrupted sleep."

Harry shook his head, trying to hand back the Dreamless Sleep.

"I-I...don't d-deserve t-to-"

Pomfrey, having reached her limit, snatched back the vile, uncorking it with a flick of her wrist. Bearing forward, she held Harry down with her left arm, quickly dumping the potion down his throat with her other hand.

Caught by surprise, Harry reflexively swallowed, downing the entire potion, causing an immediate sleepiness to cut across his frayed psyche.

"Whatever happened to that monster, it was entirely his fault, not yours," she replied harshly, before rushing back to Lockhart.

Harry opened his mouth to reply, but instead let out a long, jaw-breaking yawn. Falling back against the soft linen, he slipped quietly into sleep.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Slowly, as if emerging from a coma, Harry woke. Lying back against the thick linen, his eyes closed, Harry raised his arms, stretching them wide. For some reason his chest ached slightly, but the pain was distant. Letting out an almighty yawn, he saw that his arms were clad in silver and green pajamas. He froze at the sight.

Why was he in pajamas? And where was...

At once the dam broke, allowing the memories to flood back into his mind. Clearly, as if he had just witnessed it, he saw, in slow-motion, the black shards tearing through Lockhart's face, tearing off half of it.

He let out a strangled sob at the memory, shaking his head. It was his wand that had done it, his curse that had killed Lockhart.

He was a murderer.

At once a warm, smothering warmth enveloped him, drawing him close.

"It's okay, Harry," a mournful, familiar female voice assured.

"You came."

"Of course I did," Perenelle answered, running her long fingers through his messy hair. "Both of us came as soon as we heard."

Stiffening slightly, Harry pulled back against Perenelle, breaking her grasp.

"I...I k-k-killed him," he whispered, tears beginning to form at the inside corners of his eyes.

Her large blue eyes filled with pain, she softly took both of his hands in her own, squeezing them tightly.

"Harry, you didn't do anything wrong," she assured.

"No," Harry replied, shaking his head vehemently, "I did, I-"

Perenelle, releasing one of her hands, raised a single finger to his lips, softly silencing him.

"We know what happened, Harry. Dumbledore checked both of your wands. Lockhart," she spat, her eyes hardening, "clearly attempted to erase your memory. You had every right to defend yourself, and there was no way for you to know what destroying that Dark object would have caused."

"But I killed him!"

"It would not have mattered, even if you had," Perenelle replied, before withdrawing her wand. Flicking it, she conjured a bright silver shape, which disappeared before Harry could get a sense of its form.

"What do you mean?" he asked, eyes widened, not even daring to hope.

"Gilderoy Lockhart is currently at St. Mungo's," Perenelle answered, her lips unconsciously curling in disgust. "He is expected to live."

"Really?"

"Really," Perenelle confirmed with a nod. "That is all that I have been told, and, truth be told, all I am concerned with. Had that worthless excuse for a man died, I would shudder to think what your Ministry would do to exploit the situation."

Harry shook his head, not really caring about the Ministry. It felt like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders, allowing him to finally breathe.

He wasn't a murderer after all.

"I...I didn't think there was any way he could have lived," he admitted, his eyes downcast.

Gently, Perenelle placed a hand under his chin, and gently lifted his head up, matching their gazes.

"Harry, you're too good of a person not to feel guilty about this, but you need to know, none of this was your fault. I could not be more proud of how you handled the situation."

"It...it was horrible," Harry whispered. "To know that if I messed up once, if I was a second too slow with a shield...my mind would have been erased..."

"And you did fantastic," she assured, sending a fond smile in his direction. Slightly heartened by her encouragement, he swept his glance around the room.

He appeared to be the only patient in the Infirmary. The bed where Lockhart had lain was immaculate as all the other beds, giving no indication that a man had recently fought for his life upon it. He quickly turned away from the accusingly empty bed, back towards Perenelle.

"Where's Nicolas?"

"He should have already received my message, so I would expect him to be along any minute."

"Wait, what message?" Harry asked, confusedly.

Following his question, the Infirmary door opened, at which, Perenelle let out a slightly mischievous smile.

"Observe," she said simply, withdrawing her wand. With a flourish, she flicked it forward.

"Expecto patronum!"

A bright, shimmering shape leapt forward from her wand. With wide eyes Harry watched as the silver cloud of magic coalesced into a large ferret. Weightlessly gliding across the floor, it stood in front of the open door.

"What took so long?" the ferret asked, its voice perfectly mimicking Perenelle's. Harry laughed at the strange display of magic, so unlike anything he had ever seen before. Talking spells?

"Oh, the usual," Nicolas answered casually, stepping into the room. Dumbledore, and surprisingly, Algernon followed.

"It is good to see you awake," the alchemist said brightly, approaching the bed.

"It's good to have you here," Harry admitted. "Thanks for coming. Both of you," he clarified, moving his gaze over to Perenelle.

Nicolas waved his hand dismissively.

"There wasn't anything that would keep me from coming," he reassured, throwing a dark look in Algernon's direction. Neville's great uncle reddened slightly, but remained silent.

"Wait, what's going on here?" Harry asked, feeling slightly confused. He understood why the Flamels and Dumbledore were there, but why Algernon. What did he do?

Perenelle ran her long fingers through Harry's unruly hair, smoothing it against his head.

"We were going to tell you later, but we have had quite enough of people, professors none the less, attacking you. We are pulling you out of Hogwarts."

Protests immediately rose to his lips at her declaration, before dying off as all the memories began to assault his mind.

Screaming helplessly as he tried to save Quirrell, while blood jutted out from the Defense instructor's limbs, pooling on the ground.

Snape, under Voldemort's control, slamming him face-first into the stone wall, and the explosion of pain he had felt as his nose broke.

Lockhart thrashing on the ground, his face reduced to a red ruin.

Mostly, though, he thought of every cruel barb he received from the other students, who hated him for nothing more than rumor.

With a heavy heart, trying not to think of all the friends he'd be leaving behind, he turned to the Headmaster.

"I'm sorry," he began quietly, "but I don't think I can be here anymore. It's just...too much."

In Dumbledore's bright blue eyes, deep sadness and sorrow welled.

"I am so deeply sorry, Harry, that time and time again, you face danger from within the walls of Hogwarts. It-"

"Despite your countless promises to the contrary," shot Perenelle, her expression livid, but Nicolas put a placating hand on her shoulder.

"Please, we have already covered these arguments. There is nothing more to be said about them."

"Je m'en fou," Perenelle spat balefully, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Regardless," Nicolas continued, raising an eyebrow at his wife's comment, "that is why we must take you away, Harry."

Algernon, who had remained silent to his point, shook his head.

"I'm sorry, but-"

"You're sorry?" Nicolas asked incredulously, his eyes hardening. "Your government chooses to charge Harry with a crime, and that is all you have to say? I'm sorry?"

Algernon shook his head following Nicolas' final indignant snort.

"It's all I can say. Do you really think I had anything to do with the decision to charge Harry?"

"Who knows with you conniving British dogs!" Nicolas declared, throwing his hands in the air. "When has anything that you have done over the past year regarding the welfare of Harry made sense?"

His eyes widening, Harry's gaze darted back and forth between Algernon and Nicolas. What crime? They weren't going to charge him, were they?

Almost at once, Dumbeldore stepped in front of the two men, his arms stretched to either side, his palms facing outward.

"Please, if nothing else but for the sake of Harry, he should be told of the situation."

"There is no situation!" angrily declared Nicolas. "We are taking Harry back to France, and there is nothing you, that fat lawyer over there, or the Ministry can say to change that!"

"Can someone please tell me what's going?" Harry impatiently demanded.

Algernon, his mouth thinned to a line, started to explain, but Dumbledore raised a hand, halting him.

"I am sincerely sorry, Algernon, but I think that perhaps it is better he hears it from me."

Algernon nodded sharply in response.

"Thank you," Dumbledore graced with a slight inclination of his head, before turning to Harry, pushing his half-moon spectacles back into place. "Unfortunately, despite every appeal to common sense, the Ministry has decided to charge you with attacking Gilderoy Lockhart."

Harry deflated at the news, his head slumping. Perenelle had assured him that he wouldn't face any charges. Did they really think he actually tried to kill Lockhart?

"It is merely a formality," Dumbledore quickly assured. "The evidence clearly proves that you were not culpable. I personally checked your wand, and found that you had cast nothing more dangerous than a Reductor curse, while an examination of Lockhart's clearly proved he had tried to Memory Charm you."

"Like it matters," Harry said ruefully. "The Ministry already thinks I'm a Dark wizard."

"Perhaps," Algernon broke in, "but crimes committed on Hogwarts grounds are not tried by the full Wizengamot."

"They aren't?"

Algernon shook his head.

"Criminal trials involving crimes committed by students on Hogwarts' grounds are tried by the Board of Governors."

"How much better is that?" Perenelle exclaimed.

"Well," Algernon retorted, his face beginning to redden, "aside from the fact that I'm on the board, the Headmaster would preside over the hearing, and be able to direct the line of questioning."

"And you can promise that they wouldn't convict me?" Harry asked hopefully.

"Absolutely," Algernon agreed with a nod. "There are only twelve members on the Board, and nine votes are needed to convict. I can say with absolute confidence there is no way nine Board members are going to convict you."

Perenelle shook her head angrily.

"Longbottom, I don't trust one of your 'Board' members to make a good decision," Perenelle spat. "What's to stop us from just taking Harry back to France with us?"

Algernon, beginning to lose his patience, shook his head.

"That's no good, Perenelle. If Harry flees the country, he forfeits any right to trial, and will be automatically convicted."

"C'est vraiment des conneries!" Perenelle snapped, stomping her foot on the ground. "So he never comes back here! I fail to see a problem! Why would Harry even want to come back, especially considering the Ministry wants to punish him for defending himself?"

"It's a bit more complicated than that, I assure you. In the events of a guilty charge, combined with him fleeing the country, they'll dissolve all his assets."

"De quoi parlez-vous?"

"Longbottom, are you making this up as you go along?" Nicolas accused, his eyes narrowed.

"I assure you, I am not! The law is not often employed, but I've heard that Fudge plans to use it if Harry flees the country."

"Fine, let it disappear!" Nicolas exclaimed. "I assure you, we are more than capable of providing anything that Harry could ever need."

"Please, Nicolas, Perenelle, see reason," Dumbledore pleaded. "I agree with wanting to protect Harry from the Ministry, but the Potter vaults are Harry's birthright, and he deserves to inherit them. I will be the one presiding over the hearing, and can second Algernon's assurance that Harry will not be convicted."

"Just like you could assure for his safety?" Perenelle asked scornfully.

Angrily, Harry pounded his fist upon the bed. It just wasn't fair! It wasn't bad enough that he had to live with the guilt of what he'd done to Lockhart, he also had to go on trial?

"I don't care about the vaults," Harry said firmly. "I don't want to be here anymore."

Silence followed his declaration. Algernon looked at a loss for words, while Dumbledore merely glanced at him sadly.

"Harry, I'm sorry you feel that way," the Headmaster began slowly, "but the entire legacy of the Potter family is contained within those vaults. Would you really have them fall so easily into Ministry control?"

Frustration beginning to cloud his vision, Harry looked away. In a way, he knew Dumbledore was right, but was loathe to admitting as much. It meant agreeing to another month of hell here at Hogwarts, another month of dealing with all the other Houses tormenting him.

Could he really face all that for another month?

"Fine," Harry spat, not raising his gaze upward.

It looked like he didn't have much choice in the matter.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

"Solidarity."

At Harry's words, the section of wall swung out, revealing the low-ceilinged Slytherin Common Room. Passing through the entryway, he made his way over to the far end of the room, a scowl upon his

face. Finding an empty couch, he slung his book bag towards it, where they landed heavily upon the dark leather.

"This school is filled with idiots," Harry declared, flopping down wearily onto the couch.

"No argument here," Millicent agreed, sitting down on the other side of his books. "What were you supposed to do, just sit there and let Lockhart obliviate you?"

"I guess so," Harry bitterly spat, shaking his head. He had expected backlash from the school on his first day back, but to deal with the entire populace treating him even worse than when he was first accused of being the Heir of Slytherin...

That had been unexpected.

"Maybe it will get better once the Board clears you," Millicent offered. Her hopeful comment, however, drew a snort of disbelief from Tracey.

"What?" she asked, unconcerned with the glare Millicent had focused upon her.

"You really don't think the Board's going to clear him?"

"Well, no, of course they will," Tracey clarified, shaking her head slightly, 'but just look at what's happening this year. Is getting his name cleared going to mean anything to those idiots in Gryffindor?"

"Thanks," Harry said bitterly, despite agreeing with Tracy. Even if he was cleared of attacking Lockhart, no one would care. They'd just find something new to pin on him.

"You know, it'd almost be worth it to lose the Potter vaults to get out of here," he added, which drew a frown from Millicent.

"You can't mean that," she reasoned, shaking her head. "All your family's history..."

"Which haven't seen any of," he pointed out. "I never knew my parents...I mean, what do I really know about my family? I know everyone says that they were the greatest people, but what else are

they going to say? 'Sorry, Harry, but your parents were terrible people'? I'm...I'm just never going to know what they were truly like."

"Harry..." Millicent began, sounding slightly unsure of herself, "Just because you never knew your parents, doesn't mean that your family name isn't important. I know you haven't been in our world for very long, but the Potters are one of Britain's most respected and important families."

"I don't think Fudge agrees," Harry snorted.

"Yeah, it's low," Tracey conceded, "but would you expect anything else from him?"

"Yeah, I would! How about the Minister of Magic spending less time about worrying what I do? Why is he want to keep me here so badly? Doesn't he have a country to run?"

"It's really strange," Millicent admitted. "I wrote to my parents, and they've never heard of this ever happening before."

"I'm not surprised," Tracey grimly stated. "I mean, what Minister would go this far to make your life miserable? Why does it matter if you stay here or go back to France? Treating you like this, it's not like he's giving you any reasons to stay in Britain."

"It doesn't make any sense," Harry concluded, slumping his shoulders. He wouldn't be meeting with the Hogwarts' Board of Governors for two weeks. How was he going to make it that far without cursing the next student that hissed at him, or called him the Heir of Slytherin?

"Hey, Potter," a familiar female voice called out, stirring him from his thoughts. Turning, he saw Regina, watching him with a critical eye as she approached.

"How are you holding up?"

"Fine, I guess," Harry answered with a slight shrug. "I'm just kind of worried about the review."

Regina waved a hand dismissively.

"Don't worry about it, they'll try to nail you to the wall, but they don't have anything they can actually convict you with."

"Unless they make something up," Harry grumbled.

Regina snorted, giving a single shake of her head.

"You can stop feeling sorry for yourself now. You've got at least one powerful friend on the Board, and the Headmaster's going to support you."

Harry stayed silent, fixing a glare upon the older female Slytherin. What the bloody hell did she know? Did she have the entire school out to get her?

"You know, Potter," she continued, crossing her arms over her chest, "We haven't done any practicing for a long time."

"Yeah, I've been busy."

Regina shook her head.

"Well, I won't be taking 'no' for an answer today. You're pissed off, frustrated, and are going to lash out sooner or later. The last thing you need right now is to curse the next person to look at you the wrong way."

"She's right," encouraged Millicent with a nod.

"See, you should listen to your friends," Regina pointed out with a slight smirk. "Besides, can you think of anything more appealing right now than blowing some shit up?"

With a laugh, Harry agreed, getting up from the couch.

Blowing shit up definitely sounded good right now.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

"And that," concluded the squeaky voice of Professor Flitwick, "Is how we perform the Engorging Charm. On each of your desks-"

Flitwick waved his wand a single time, causing watermelons to materialize out of thin-air, and land on the desk of every student.

"-will be a single watermelon. Please split up into groups of two, and practice the charm. As always, if any of you have questions, feel free to ask."

The lecture portion complete, tiny Professor Flitwick hopped off the desk, as the student began to pair together.

As was customary for mixed-House classes, the second-years split in half, the Hufflepuffs on one side, Harry and his fellow Slytherins on the other. Daphne and Blaise immediately paired together, without debate. Taking the initiative, Harry approached Nott, well aware that Millicent felt uneasy around the quiet, reedy boy.

"Do you want to work together?"

"Okay," Nott answered in a flat, level voice. Almost emotionless, it lacked the warmth and cadence associated with most human speech. Reaching into his robes, Nott withdrew his wand, pointing it at the closest watermelon.

"Engorgio."

The yellow spell fizzled upon contact with the watermelon, causing it to vibrate slightly, but not much else. Harry frowned, immediately seeing the flaw in Nott's wand work.

"Watch me," he instructed. Carefully, he moved his wand in a circle, before adding a slight jab at the end. Nott watched him, his grey eyes flat. Harry couldn't tell if his partner was angry or glad for the demonstration, as all he could see was a vague sort of disassociation. Despite Tracey's claims to the contrary, Harry definitely agreed with Millicent.

There was clearly something wrong with Theodore Nott.

Without preamble, Nott tried the spell again. Though his wand movements were perfect this time around, the yellow spell splashed against the watermelon without effect.

"That didn't work," Nott dryly pointed out.

"No, it didn't," Harry agreed, tapping his wand against the side of his head, trying to think. The wand movements were perfect, no problem there. So...

"Nott, what did you think about when you cast the spell?" Harry asked, glancing at his partner. Nott looked almost confused for a moment.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, it's not just about the spell, right?" Harry asked, casting a contemplative glance at his partner. "It's about what you actually want to do once the spell is cast."

"Don't I want the watermelon to expand?" Nott asked, sounding quite unsure.

Harry didn't answer for a moment, studying the quiet, mouse-haired Slytherin. While a good student, Harry recalled that Nott excelled in Potions, fourth to only himself, Hermione and Tracey. He was certainly competent in Herbology, Defense and most Charms classes, though he'd struggled mightily with Transfiguration and more recent Charms classes. What was his blind spot?

"Nott, how do you do Transfiguration?"

"I point my wand at something, and make it change," he answered after a moment's pause.

"Okay, but how? What technique do you use?"

For a second, Nott looked almost confused, an alien reaction from the normally placid boy.

"I make it do what I want."

"Um, okay, but how though? Like, think about the first class we had with McGonagall, where she wanted us to change matchsticks into needles. It was a step-by-step thing mentally, right? You'd picture the head of the matchstick beginning to darken from the light yellow of the wood. The flat edge would start to bend inward, starting to make the top of the needle. Do you get what I'm saying?"

Unblinking, Nott silently contemplated his explanation. Quickly, he turned to the watermelon, casting the spell again. As opposed to fizzling out, the watermelon grew slightly.

"Much better," Harry encourgaed.

"Thanks," Nott said distractedly, not paying any attention to him. Instead, he re-cast the spell, causing the watermelon to increase in size again. As opposed to his normally passive demeanor, there was a look of intense concentration upon his face. Shrugging, figuring Nott wanted to practice by himself, Harry walked away, over to Millicent and Tracey.

"How's it going?" Harry asked.

"Let me guess," Tracey snapped irritably, "You had no trouble with it."

Suppressing a grin, Harry shrugged casually, causing Tracey to let out an aggravated huff. Turning to the watermelon, she tried again, but the uncooperative piece of fruit merely quivered. Her bright blue eyes narrowed for moment, as if she was contemplating blasting it into pieces.

"Maybe your cut needs to be sharper on-"

"I've got this," Tracey snapped, cutting off Millicent mid-sentence.

"Yeah, bang-up job last time around," she said with a roll of her eyes, drawing a glare from Tracey. Turning back to the watermelon, the temperamental Slytherin tried again.

"Engorgio!"

For a moment, the watermelon vibrated, before detonating, spraying bits and pieces of watermelon everywhere.

"A little more restraint, if you would," Professor Flitwick squeaked, approaching them.

"Yes, sir," Tracey forced out, her teeth gritted.

"It's a gentle movement," Flitwick continued, drawing his own wand and demonstrating the motions. "We want to ease the object into growth, not force it. Keep that in mind, and I believe you'll have it, Miss Davis."

"Thank you, Professor," Tracey muttered, her face turning her, her eyes downcast.

"You are quite welcome," the tiny man beamed, before returning to his desk.

After the professor had left, Millicent turned to their remaining watermelon, mimicking Flitwick's motions with her wand, speaking the incantation firmly. At once the watermelon began to grow, swelling to nearly twice its size.

"You know, the Professor's right," Millicent said brightly, injecting mock innocence into her voice. "It just needed a lighter touch."

Fighting back a grin, he saw Tracey's eyes fill with annoyance. Letting out a small growl, she began to practice the wand movements. Despite Flitwick's words, it appeared she was dueling with the air.

Leaning close to Millicent, Harry put his mouth to her ear.

"I don't think she took Flitwick's lesson to heart."

Millicent let out a snort of laughter, unable to contain herself.

"I'm glad I'm fucking entertaining you two," Tracey snapped irritably.

Though for a moment Harry considered egging her on, he decided against it. Though the opportunity to torture her because of bad spell-work was very rare, if he didn't smooth things over, she'd just keep building up steam.

Right as he stepped up to begin diffusing the situation, a haughty voice called to him.

"This is Charms, not Dark Arts practice."

Turning, Harry saw Justin Finch-Fletchly step away from his partner, a scowl upon his face.

"You don't know what you're talking about," scoffed Harry.

"We saw the fruit explode," Hannah Abbott added, her eyes wide.

For a single moment, Harry found himself dumbfounded, unable to compose a reply, a state his fellow Slytherins seemed to share. Tracey broke through the paralysis first, but Zacharias beat her to the punch.

"Yes, Hannah," the blond Hufflepuff said dryly, striding forward, "Harry's perfecting a Dark Watermelon-Exploding Curse. I'm sure it will be key to his takeover of the Wizarding world."

At once, the majority of the Slytherins broke into laughter, openly mocking Hannah. Her face growing red, she turned and stormed towards the opposite end of the classroom, her long blonde pigtails trailing behind her.

"Look what you just did!" Justin demanded, his face reddening.

Zacharias shrugged.

"She was being stupid. What else was I supposed to do?"

"Why did the bloody Hat put you in Hufflepuff?" Justin wondered.

"That will be enough, back to work," Flitwick commanded from the front of the room.

The majority of the Hufflepuffs sent a withering gaze towards Zacharias, before returning to their own work. Not exactly welcome among his classmates, he walked over to Harry's group.

"Thanks," Millicent said immediately.

The blond boy shrugged.

"Sometimes, I just can't stay quiet, I guess."

"I'm glad you don't," Harry said earnestly. "With all the stuff I hear from people in your House, it's nice to see not everyone believes it."

"No one should. The very idea that you're a Dark Lord, going around petrifying students, using really Dark magic...it's embarrassing that people in my House are actually listening to the Gryffindors."

"Ron fucking Weasley," Tracey spat.

Zacharias raised a single eyebrow at her language, but said nothing about it.

"It's not just him, everyone in the House seems to be saying the same thing. Worse, a lot of the Hufflepuffs believe it."

"It used to only be the second-years," Harry said, "but their stupidity seems to be contagious."

"I know," Zacharias agreed. "I think I even saw one of the Weasley twins telling a first-year you use snakes to spy on people."

"Really?" Harry asked, surprised to hear it. The twins had been decent to him all year, had even jokingly called him the Heir of Slytherin, but...this seemed like a little much for them.

"Yeah, and it also doesn't help that Marietta is shooting her mouth off, telling everyone you're going to be thrown in Azkaban for...well..."

Zacharias trailed off into uncomfortable silence, not exactly comfortable with broaching the subject.

"Marietta's mother is on the board, isn't she?" Millicent asked, to which the Hufflepuff responded with a nod.

"I mean, I don't think it's true, even though Marietta says she gets inside information from her mother."

For a moment Harry's heart stopped. He had forgotten the Madam Edgecombe was on the Board, the same body which would judge him in a few short days. If one of them was already saying he was bound for Azkaban...

Was Algernon wrong? Could they really send him to Azkaban? The thought seemed stupid, outlandish, but then again...

Didn't that describe the Ministry?

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

It was a silent, contemplative Harry that made his way back to the Slytherin dormitories after Charms. Trailing slightly behind his two closest friends, his mind was heavy with the implications of Zacharias' words.

"I'm sure Marietta's just spreading lies," Millicent assured, trying to dislodge him from his funk.

"It definitely is," agreed Tracey. "She's probably just pissed because now everyone knows her mum was fooling around with Lockhart."

"That doesn't really help," muttered Harry. "What if that makes Edgecombe push for a harder punishment?"

"Doesn't matter," Tracey quickly pointed out. "They don't have anything to convict you with."

"Do you think that matters to them? I almost killed someone, guys. That's all they'll need."

"No it's not, Harry," Millicent insisted. "You have both Dumbledore and Algernon defending you. No matter what Edgecombe says, Dumbledore's word is going to mean more than hers."

"I hope you're right," Harry sighed as they approached a turn in the hallway. From up ahead, voices floated back to them.

"You're going to stop telling people Potter's innocent," a bossy, unpleasant female voice ordered.

"Why would I do that?" asked a vaguely interested, detached voice that matched only one person he knew.

Luna.

"Because he's an evil Dark wizard," the other voice hissed, obviously losing patience. "You've heard all the things the Gryffindors have been telling us."

"He's already killed two people, Loony," a third, male voice spoke, his voice exasperated. "What more proof do you need?"

Gritting his teeth, Harry marched around the corner, his vision turning red. For a moment he pictured himself drawing his wand, and showing the two students bothering Luna some of what Regina had been teaching him.

"Hi Harry," Luna said brightly, waving to him, seemingly undisturbed that she had been boxed in by two larger students. In an almost comical fashion, the two older Ravenclaws spun around, revealing themselves as Marietta and Michael Corner. Suppressing the urge to hit Marietta with a Slug Vomiting Hex, he turned his attention to Luna.

"Hello Luna," he answered back, keeping his voice light. "Are you okay?"

"Well, Marietta and Michael are trying to make me believe that silly lies are truth right now, so I'm feeling rather deceived," she said airily, before beginning to hum under her breath. Marietta sent a quick glare at Luna, before turning to Harry, her eyes alight with hate.

"What do you want, Dark wizard?"

Tracey went to open her mouth, but Harry nudged her with his arm, an indication to stay silent. She glanced at him, her blue eyes hardening for a moment, before shrugging.

"My friend Luna looks like she's kinda crowded right now," Harry said, locking eyes with Marietta's hazel ones. "I think she could use some air."

"It is becoming a bit hot over here, and that's how Wrackspurts hunt," Luna explained, before stepping away from the two older students.

"We're not finished!" Marietta spat, grabbing Luna's arm. At once, Harry and his two friends drew their wands, all three tips pointed

straight at the third-year girl. Michael began to draw his wand, but wilted quickly beneath the glares of the three Slytherins, instead opting to let his arm fall slack, swallowing heavily.

"I think you should let her go," warned Harry.

"What are you going to do, kill us too?" Marietta spat viciously. "My mum's on the Board, Potter! You hurt me, they're going to throw you to the Dementors."

"Maybe," Harry replied with a casual shrug. "Then again, like you said, I've already killed two people. What's another two?"

"Just let her go!" Michael exclaimed, fear in his eyes. "Let's get out of here."

Marietta threw a disgusted glance towards her classmate, before letting go of Luna's arm.

"Let's see how confident you are after the trial, when the Dementors come to give you a kiss."

With that, she spun around, her reddish-blond hair flying behind her, brushing past Michael as if he wasn't there. Like a dog with its tail tucked between its legs, Michael followed her down the hallway, throwing fearful glances back over his shoulder as he fled.

"She didn't hurt you, did she?" Millicent asked Luna, eyeing the red marks on the pale girl's arm.

"No, but I do wonder if the Wrackspurts were already inside Marietta's head."

Both Millicent and Tracey bore twin looks of confusion. Harry felt his mood begin to lift as he struggled to keep his laughter inside.

"Well, just as long as you're alright," he said with a grin. At his words, her blue eyes turned to him, growing even wider than usual.

"You have to be careful, Harry," she warned, her tone grave.

"Of what?" Tracey asked.

"They're trying to poison you, Harry," Luna warned, keeping her eyes locked on Harry. "All of them."

All three of the Slytherin students stares at the tiny blonde girl, trying to decipher he words.

"It's starting to work," she continued, heedless to their stares. "You need to be careful."

"Who's trying to poison him?" Tracey asked hesitantly.

Luna chose not to answer, instead letting out a sigh as she bent over, picking up her fallen book bag. Rising up, she looked at the two older girls.

"Please keep a close eye on Harry," she pleaded, her gaze shifting to Millicent. "He's going to need your help."

With that, she began to move away from the trio, walking at a clip unlike her usual slow, dream-like gait.

In the wake of her departure, the three friends could only stare at one another, confusion written plainly upon all their faces.

What the bloody hell had that been about?

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

March 15, 1993

The day of the hearing dawned bright and sunny, the arrival of spring finally beginning to feel like a reality as opposed to a fond daydream.

In direct contrast to the brightening days, a bleary-eyed Harry Potter walked slowly down the hall, his turbulent thoughts equal parts fear and anger. He had barely gotten any sleep the previous night, having done nothing but tossed and turned.

"You'll do fine," Millicent reassured, flashing a small smile in his direction. Both Tracey and the large Slytherin girl had taken it upon themselves to walk him to the hearing, which had been scheduled a

mere ten minutes after his last class for the day.

"Besides," Tracey offered, "even if they do throw you in Azkaban, you can use your Dark Heir of Slytherin Parselmouth magic to escape.

Harry let out a small chuckle, marveling that she had managed to capture every Gryffindor stereotype in a single sentence. As he turned the corner, the large oak door came into view, causing the smile to disappear from his face.

Dread immediately began to pull at him, inciting the strong urge to bolt in the opposite direction, and not stop until he had made it past Hogwarts' gates.

"Here it is," he said lamely, eyeing the door with trepidation.

After a moment's hesitation, Millicent moved closer to him, wrapping her large arms around him, enveloping him in a tight embrace. He stiffened for a moment, before leaning into her. Nearly a foot taller than him, his forehead pressed into the hollow of her throat.

"You're going to do just fine," she whispered into his ear, her voice low, soothing.

"Thanks," he replied back, becoming cognizant of the slight pressure of her developing chest pressing against him through her dark robes. His cheeks beginning to burn, he stepped back quickly, embarrassed by his reaction.

Millicent's eyebrows contracted slightly at the suddenness of his movements, as if unsure she had done the right thing. Hoping to assure her, Harry grasped one of her hands, giving it a healthy squeeze.

"I really mean it, thanks Millie," he reiterated, grateful for the support. Reassured, Millicent smiled wide. For a short moment, it transformed her face, softening its harder contours, making it look almost beautiful.

"Thanks for coming, too," Harry said, focusing his attention over to Tracey. "I don't know how I would have made it without you two."

There was no exaggeration in his words. The long wait to the hearing had been a difficult journey, with not a single day passing without wanting to curse at least one person. Without them, he surely would have been expelled for cursing too many other students.

Crossing her arms over her thin body, Tracey stared at the ground for a moment, before looking back up. She favored him with an uncharacteristically timid smile.

"Get in there and show those stuffy coots you don't fuck with the Heir of Slytherin."

Harry let out a healthy chuckle.

"I will," he promised, before turning towards the set of double doors. Swallowing heavily, he pushed through, a small smile still upon his face.

It died quickly.

The room's layout had changed vastly since his last trip to the Board's office. The high, wide windows, giving a generous view of Hogwarts' ground were gone, replaced by wood paneled sections. Instead of the long, welcoming table, the middle of the room had been sunken slightly. Surrounded the sunken section was U-shaped bench which took up the entire rear of the room. Behind the bench sat the members of the Hogwarts Board of Governors, every set of eyes trained upon him.

Algernon Longbottom broke into a grin at his arrival, sending him an encouraging wink. Across from him, on the left side of the bench, Madam Edgecombe sent Harry a wilting look, saturated with venom. The Headmaster sat at the back section, directly in the center, elevated slightly above the other Governors. He inclined his head at Harry's arrival, a slight twinkle in his eyes.

Yet, Harry had eyes for none of them, or any of the other nine unfamiliar faces.

Garbed in finely cut, expensive robes, platinum-blond hair swept neatly behind him, Lucius Malfoy sat, his aristocratic features a

mask of indifference. The breath froze in Harry's lungs, for the first time coming face-to-face with the man that had sent him Slytherin's ring.

"Mister Potter," a haughty voice interrupted, breaking through his paralysis.

"We do not have all day," Madam Edgecombe continued, her gaze disapproving.

"The hearing is scheduled for three-thirty," Dumbledore said lightly. "And right now, the time is..."

With slow, relaxed movements, the Headmaster drew a large pocket watch from his robes.

"...three twenty five," he finished, before snapping the watch closed. "Mister Potter still has five minutes."

Hiding a smirk, Harry watched as Edgecombe whipped her head towards Dumbledore, sending her strawberry-blond curls astray. The Headmaster showed no reaction at her accompanying glare, beginning to whistle softly beneath his breath. On the left side of the bench, several of the Governors began to whisper conspiratorially, obviously not pleased with Dumbledore's actions.

Emboldened slightly by the Headmaster's strong show of support, Harry closed the door behind him. Stepping down the three wide steps, he stood in the middle of the floor. Looking up to catch Dumbledore's eye, his gaze drifted back over to Lucius Malfoy. With the height difference, he actually had to bend his neck slightly, an act which made him feel tiny, insignificant. They were like the Olympian gods, passing judgment down upon feeble humanity.

"How are you this afternoon, Mister Potter?" Dumbledore asked kindly, looking down upon him. Surprised by the informality of the words, Harry struggled to come up with a proper response.

"Um, I'm...fine. Uh, how are you?"

"Very well, thanks for asking. Would you mind if we began a bit early?"

To his left, he saw Edgecombe's lips thin at Dumbledore's words, while a few other witches and wizards bore dark looks.

"No," Harry answered with a shake of his head. Not exactly a truthful answer, but the Headmaster probably hadn't been expecting one.

"Excellent. As you are well aware, we have summoned you today to try to get an accurate picture of what happened."

Beneath the heavy glare of the Board of Governors, he began to speak, praying he wasn't about to dig his own grave.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Almost blindly, his vision burning with barely restrained tears, Harry tore off from the Board of Governors' courtroom. Running down the corridor, he kicked at the hidden keystone that Tracey had found during their first full day at Hogwarts. The section of wall pulling back, Harry rushed through, the passage closing behind him.

"Lumos."

A bright light erupted from his wand, illuminating the dusty and cobwebbed stone. Holding his wand in front of him, revealing countless sets of footsteps in the dust, he jogged forward. From memory, he took a right at the first intersection, then followed the pathway to the end.

It opened up into a small room. A stained glass window took up half the room, painting it in blues, greens and purples. Extinguishing his wand, he collapsed against the stone wall, sliding down it to a sitting position, knees pushing against his chest. Unbidden, tears began to roll from his eyes. Not of sadness, or fear, but rage.

The Hogwarts Board of Governors had not deemed any topic to be sacred, above scrutiny. From the brutal end of Gilderoy Lockhart they had started, cutting questions and searing insinuations in hand, barely giving him a chance to breath before each. No stone was left unturned as their questioning spiraled back in time, to each of the petrifications, to every fight or rumored exaggeration throughout his second year, to Filch's death.

Not content, further back they traveled, asking him specific questions pertaining to the end of the first year, and what role he may have had in the murder of Percy Weasley.

Crimson filled his vision as he wished death upon all of the Board members who had spoken against him. Visions of Madam Edgecombe writhing in agony beneath his Cruciatus Curse danced across his mind. He seemed so full with hatred that it might start to pour from his skin, drowning everyone at Hogwarts with it.

Who were they to judge him? Were they forced to fight for their memories, their lives against Lockhart, knowing that all it took was one small mistake, and everything was all over? Could they have done it?

Wiping an arm across his leaking eyes, he wondered how long it would take to get a hold of the Flamels, and for them to get him away from here. If they were going to return a guilty verdict, there was no way he was sticking around here, Potter vaults be damned.

Lost in thought, Harry didn't hear the footsteps until they were nearly upon him. Startled, he quickly rose to his feet, drawing his wand, to discover that the new arrival were the Weasley twins. Wiping quickly at his eyes, he lowered the wand.

"What are you guys doing here?"

The red-headed twins glanced at each other a single time, exchanging knowing smiles, before turning back towards Harry.

"Well, we thought you could use some company," Fred explained.

Harry looked at them oddly for a moment, wondering why they would even think that, especially right now.

"Uh, no, I...I'm fine."

"Are you sure? " George asked. "From what we've heard, the trial didn't go all that smashingly for you."

Harry, dumbfounded, looked from twin to twin, but their small, secret smiles revealed nothing.

"Wait, how do you know what happened there?"

"Truth be told, we don't," Fred admitted with a shrug, "but....with a Dark wizard such as yourself on trial, I couldn't have imagined it going very well."

"For you, at least," George clarified.

Harry frowned, not really in the mood for the twins' humor, today being very tactless, even for them. Deciding to ignore the comment, he started moving towards the exit.

"Anyway, I think I'll be going back to the dorms."

Fred shook his head in mock disappointment.

"I don't think so, you could really use the company."

"I mean," George continued, picking up his brother's thread, "with the Aurors already on their way to take you to Azkaban, we can't have you hiding among the other snakes, can me?"

"What the fuck is your problem?" Harry angrily demanded. It's bad enough that I had to go on trial for defending myself, but how I have to take shit from you two? I don't bloody think so."

Marching towards the exit, he attempted to shoulder his way through the larger Weasley twins, only to have them catch him, throwing him backwards, into the wall. His back hit hard against the unforgiving stone.

"I'd say it's better than he deserves, only being tried once. Right, Fred?"

"Oh, indeed. After all, where was the trial for killing our brother?"

"Are you fucking serious?" Harry exclaimed.

"Completely," George answered, before quickly drawing his wand.

"And we think it's about time you paid," Fred added, pulling out his wand.

"Petrificus totalus!"

Twins streaks of red rushing towards him, Harry snapped up his wand, conjuring a corporeal shield, deflecting the two spells to the side. Holding the shield strong, he strode forward, twisting his wand slightly as the second volley of spells zoomed at him. The slanted shield deflected George's stunner back into the wall, but Fred's green spell struck him directly in the stomach, crumpling him.

Recognizing and identifying Fred's reflected green spell, Harry quickly dropped the shield, flinging a banisher at him. Retching heavily, a large slug projectile vomited from his mouth, the spell caused the slug to rapidly change direction, back into Fred's face. It exploded like a green, organic bomb, painting his freckled visage with blood and guts. He immediately began to scream, clutching at his burning eyes, green slime leaking from them.

"You bastard!" George screamed. "Diffindo!"

Harry, getting angrier, conjured a quick shield, deflecting the cutter. Keeping the shield aloft, he deflected George's banisher back at his face. He dodges most of it, but it clipped his ear, prompting a scream of pain from the teen. Bringing his wand down in a low arc, he then jabbed it forward.

"Torpeo membri!"

"Adlevo doloris!"

George jumped out of the way of the first spell, only to have the dark purple pain curse strike him in the chest, eliciting an agonized scream. His opponent defenseless, Harry whipped his wand forward.

"Surppressio vigilis!"

The dark grey curse struck George directly in the head. At once, he slumped to the ground, curling up into a fetal position, shivering profusely.

"Scourgify!"

Hearing the cleaning spell, Harry turned to see Fred, green slime still coating his face, but eyes clear, charging towards him.

Sweeping his wand across his body, Harry transfigured the floor into ice. Unable to stop his momentum, Fred's feet flew out from under him. He landed heavily on his right arm, an audible crack echoing through the room.

"What'd you do to my brother?" Fred demanded between gasps of pain. "More Dark magic, Potter?"

"Yes," Harry answered grimly. Reverting the floor back to stone, he drew back his foot and kicked Fred as hard as he could in the stomach, driving him up and onto his back, desperately gasping for air.

Panting heavily, Harry pointed his wand down at his fallen opponent, his arm shaking. A voice inside his mind urged him to curse the Gryffindor student more, a final payback for his betrayal.

"What's wrong with you?" Harry asked, his voice shaking slightly with anger. "You two said you didn't buy into Ron's lies."

"That...that was before...we saw the truth," Fred spat between gulps of air. "We know what you are, Potter. You're a Dark wizard, a liar, but worst of all, a murd-"

With a cry of hatred, Harry swung his wand down, levitating Fred up in the air. Cutting his wand to the left, he sent the boy crashing into the wall, Fred's back and head colliding into the wall.

He held him in midair for a moment, his arm shaking. With one quick flick of his wand, he could send Fred flying across the room, through the stupid stained glass window, and...

With mounting horror, Harry began to back away, lowering his wand, sending Fred crashing to the floor. What the hell had he just done?

Turning, he ran away, deep shame consuming him. He ran all the way back to the Slytherin dormitories, ignoring his friends. Sprinting into the second-year quarters, he leaped into his bed, drawing the green hangings behind him.

At once, spasms struck his body. Burying a pillow into his face, he began to scream into it, pouring out all his horror, shame, trying to

ignore the feeling of power he had felt when Fred hung helpless in the air.

The feeling that they had no way of fighting back, that he could do anything he wanted, and no one could stop him.

No one.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

"I don't believe it," Millicent said disbelievingly, shaking her head. "The twins had always seemed different from the rest of them."

"I know," Harry glumly replied.

"You can't beat yourself up about it, though," she hastened to add.

"Definitely," Tracey agreed. "After all, they were the ones who started the fight. They played with fire, and got burned."

Harry shook his head.

"Even so, I still shouldn't have used Dark magic on them."

"Are you serious, Harry? They deserved it!"

"It doesn't matter. Now the Gryffindors' claims that I'm a Dark wizard actually have some truth to them."

Tracey let out a derisive snort.

"Please. You didn't hurt them permanently; just enough to show them that you won't be an easy target. They're the guilty ones, not you."

"You think that matters to them?" Harry asked, incredulously. "You still don't get it, do you? To them, I probably just proved every bad thing they ever heard Ron say about me."

"Well, what were you supposed to?" Millicent asked quietly following a moment of awkward silence. "They're old and know more magic. Were you supposed to just let them curse you?"

"I don't know," Harry admitting, feeling defeated by the issue. "Whatever I try to do, whether it's avoiding a fight, or meeting them head on, it just makes things worse and worse."

Hearing the whisper of moving robes, Harry turned to see Regina approach him.

"Budge over, Potter," she ordered, her voice offering no choice. Harry did as commanded, and the dark-haired sixth-year filled the open seat immediately.

"Why so glum? I thought you'd be happier after teaching those fucking clowns a lesson."

"Who told you?" Harry asked, leaning forward, his eyes darting back and forth.

Regina let out a light chuckle.

"Don't worry about it, Potter, none of the professors are going to have you thrown in Azkaban. From what I know, the twins showed up at the Infirmary with spell-damage, but claimed it was an experiment gone wrong. Good fucking work," she praised, ruffling his hair. "My little tiger is starting to grow some claws."

"Uh, thanks."

Regina let out a groan, turning to both Millicent and Tracey.

"Please tell me he's not whining about how he shouldn't be using Dark magic on other people," she begged.

Tracey grinned evilly, letting out a snort of laughter.

"I guess I have my answer," she said, turning back to Harry. "What's wrong with you, Potter? Do you actually want the Gryffindors to keep walking over you?"

"No," Harry denied. "They're not going to stop, though. They're too stupid."

"I guess," she conceded. "Just remember, though: If it ever gets too much to handle, just go to either Flint or I. Anyone that gives you trouble, will get twice as much in return. Stay sharp, Harry."

With that, she rose from the table, going back towards the other older Slytherins.

"See, Harry," Tracey said, nudging him. "Regina thinks you did the right thing."

"I don't think there's many Slytherins out there that will be against hurting Gyrffindors," Millicent pointed out dryly.

Tracey let out a snort of laughter, and even Harry couldn't keep the smile off his face. Shaking his head, he lowered his fork back down to his kippers and sausage, resuming his meal.

His plate almost cleared, the morning delivery commenced. Throughout the hall, throngs of owl descended from the skies, each holding a parcel or letter within their talons. Surprisingly, an unknown barn owl touched down in front of him, clutching a letter. Taking it, the bird took flight and left, not bothering to wait for a reply.

"You've got a fan," Daphne observed, sitting down beside Millicent.

"If I do, it's an anonymous one," Harry said, turning the envelope over in his hands. While his name was clearly written on the front, there were no other markings.

"Maybe it's a Gryffindor," Millicent suggested with a grin. "She just doesn't want her House-mates finding out."

Shrugging, Harry tore open the envelope.

"Wait, stop!" Tracey cried, but Harry had already placed his fingers inside, searching for the letter.

At once, an orange powder wafted out of the envelope, coating Harry's hand. At once, it began to burn, as if he had stuck his hand in a fireplace. Pulling his hand back with a cry, large red welts began to pop up over his hand, as if it was being eaten through.

Millicent and Tracey immediately rose to their feet, rushing towards him.

"The Infirmary! Now!"

Tears of pain beginning to form at the corners of his eyes, they two girls escorted him from the Slytherin table, towards the exit. As he passed the Gryffindor table, a loud chorus of hisses broke up. Hatefully, he locked eyes with the Weasleys twins, who wore identical malevolent smiles. Aside from a George's bright, crimson ear, the twins showed no obvious damage from last night.

"My, Fred, would you look at that? It appears that the Heir of Slytherin got hold of something a bit too hot to handle."

"Indeed, brother, but what else would you expect from cold-blooded creatures?"

Hearty, cruel laughter rising up from the Gryffindor table, the last thing he saw was Fred sending him out with a jaunty, jovial wave.

For a moment, last night's hate returned, banishing even the pain emanating forth from his hand.

Maybe he should have flung Weasley out the window after all.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

March 31, 1993

"So what is it?" Harry asked, taking a seat at their customary table located in the corner of the library.

"Yeah, you've been holding out on us all day," Tracey grumpily added.

Unsurprisingly, Hermione ignored the comment, and hefted the large bulk of her bulging book bag onto the table.

"I wanted to wait until after class had ended for the day," she explained, her honey-colored eyes sweeping over the gathered assembly. "I...I think I've finally found where the Chamber might be."

Tracey rolled her eyes at the claim, but Harry, Millicent and Neville all leaned forward, eager to hear more.

"Also," she admitted, "I wanted to be able to discuss this through with you all, before I even thought about doing anything."

Taking a deep breath, Hermione reached into her bag. Her face scrunching together in frustration, she rooted around in her bag for several moments, before her expression turned into one of bewilderment.

"This is quite the revelation," Tracey said lightly, making a show of examining her fingernails. Hermione flung a withering glance in her direction, before abruptly taking her book bag and upending its contents onto the table, creating a racket. Books, parchment, quills and bottles of ink scattered across the table.

"It's not here!" she angrily declared, slamming her Transfiguration book against the table to punctuate the point. "I could have sworn I put it in there this morning!"

"Yet here we are, still in the dark," mocked Tracey.

"Give it a rest," Neville snapped, clearly tiring of the blonde Slytherin's antics.

"Thanks," Hermione said gratefully, flashing him a wide smile. "It still must be up in my room. Hold on, I'll be back as soon as I can."

Quickly stuffing her possession back into her book bag, she fled from the library, moving quickly, bushy brown hair streaming behind her.

"Well, I guess we'll have to wait a little longer then," Millicent dryly stated, before drawing her Charms book from her bag.

A frown upon his face, Harry turned to Tracey.

"You don't have to be so hard on her."

"I'm so tired of her," Tracey said, throwing her hands in the air. "Holding knowledge over our heads like some sort of god, holding it

close to her chest, hinting at it. It's like he's in on some giant secret, and if we're good, she'll let us in on it."

"Listen to yourself!" Neville exclaimed, frustration evident in his tone. "She isn't trying to piss you off, she's just excited that all her research, all her hard work, is finally paying off. Do you really have to hold that against her?"

"Yes, I do," Tracey snapped back. "What, is she the only one who's trying to figure out what and where the Chamber of Secrets is? We're all working on it."

Reaching into her book bag, she pulled out a heavy tome that seemed to weigh nearly as much as her, easily containing over a thousand pages. The title on the spine identified it as 'The Complete Magical Bestiary'.

"I've been pouring over this bloody heavy book whenever I get a chance, cross-referencing nearly every creature in this stupid book! Do you seem me patting myself on the back about it?"

Blowing out a frustrated breath, she opened the book, to a place close to the beginning.

"How far have you gotten?" Millicent asked, raising her thick eyebrows, apparently surprised by the apparent lack of progress.

Tracey let out a snort of laughter.

"I'm almost all the way through. I started at the back, and am working my way to the front."

"Um, okay," Millicent replied, trying to hide a smile.

"Come on! How many times have you been looking for something, and only found it at the very end of the book?"

The other three students openly began laughing at her. Tracey tried to act indignant, but the façade quickly fell away.

"You all suck," she declared with a smile, before opening the thick book.

For the next half hour, the four students alternated between chatting and feeble attempts to get schoolwork done. Just as Harry began to consider that perhaps Hermione was having trouble finding her surprise, Madam Pince approached their table.

"Mister Potter," the elderly librarian rasped, "Professor Dumbledore needs you in his office."

Harry's breath seized at the words.

The verdict was in.

"You'll be fine," Millicent assured, sending him an encouraging smile.

"Thanks," he replied as he rose from his seat, shaking slightly.

"She's right," Neville seconded. "Talking to Uncle Algie, he says you have nothing to worry about."

As walked away from the table, it occurred to Harry how much he wished that were true.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry stood at the foot of the stone spiral staircase, looking up it, as he had for the past few minutes. Each step seemed could have been hundreds of feet tall for how insurmountable they seemed.

Swallowing heavy, he took the first step. With a slight grinding the staircase spiraled upwards, bringing him directly to the circular Headmaster's office.

"Good evening, Harry," Dumbledore greeted, smiling warmly at his arrival.

"G-good evening, sir," he forced out in return, pleasantries the furthest thing from his mind, a fact not lost upon the Headmaster.

"Once again, I am sorry that you were forced to endure the Board's inquiry, though I am pleased to inform you that after their deliberations, you were acquitted of all charges."

"What?" Harry yelled, incredulously. He had been so certain of their verdict that he hadn't even considered that they would find him innocent."

"There was never any doubt regarding your innocence," Dumbledore declared, "and once again, I feel that I must apologize for you having to endure their cruel barbs. I assure you, if there was any way I could have spared you the indignity, I would have."

"I know," Harry bitterly replied, "but since Edgecombe and Malfoy had it in for me, they were going to get my thrown out."

The Headmaster was silent for a moment, his bright blue eyes giving nothing away, before letting out a sigh.

"Lucius Malfoy voted to exonerate you."

"Wait, what?"

Dumbledore nodded.

"I must admit, I was surprised by his vote as well."

"But...I thought it was Edgecombe and Malfoy who pushed to have me tried?"

"Indeed, it was."

A shocked Harry quickly concluded that none of it made sense. Lucius forces him to go on trial, and then stays silent during the entire trial, before voting him innocent? Why bother pushing for the trial in the first place unless he planned on finding him guilty?

"Ah, Harry," the Headmaster spoke up, breaking the silence, "it would appear that we have a trio of visitors intent on meeting with me. If you'll excuse me for a moment while I entertain them?"

Harry nodded in confirmation.

"How'd you know they were there, sir?"

"The gargoyle at the door keeps me appraised of all visitors," he answered, rising slowly to his feet. Satisfied, Harry made his way

over to one of the larger windows, leaving the area in front of Dumbledore's desk clear for the visitors.

From the staircase emerged three of Harry's least favorite people. In the lead was Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge, wearing a muggle-like pinstriped suit, a lime-green bowler perched upon his head. Closely behind him was Madam Edgecombe, her mouth thinned to a line. Lucius Malfoy brought up the rear. Dressed in expensive dark robes, his silver-headed cane tucked into his belt, he wore a small, satisfied smirk.

"Minister, Madam, Lucius," Dumbledore greeted, "to what occasion do I owe the pleasure?"

"Today's visit has little to do with pleasure, I assure you," the Minister answered grimly. Reaching under his robes, he withdrew a familiar book-bag and tossed it carelessly onto Dumbledore's desk.

Hermione's book bag.

"That's Hermione's!" Harry exclaimed loudly. "What happened to her?"

Edgecombe was the only one to react to his outburst, sending him a single deep look of contempt, before turning back to the Headmaster.

"The Heir of Slytherin," she began, her gaze moving to Harry briefly, "left yet another message, right below the original."

"Her skeleton will lie in the Chamber forever," the Minister continued. "Yet another attack in the school you preside over, Dumbledore? This is the final straw."

Helpless anger surged through Harry at the news. One of his best friends, the only one who might know where the Chamber was, taken.

"If we cannot guarantee the safety of our students," Lucius added, speaking for the first time, his voice cool, "then we must evacuate the school."

Unseen by the four adults, Harry's mouth dropped open in shock, distracting him from his anger. This was not the first time he had heard Lucius speak, though it was the first time he had seen it.

It had been Lucius who had been speaking to Lockhart during the first week of class!

His reaction having gone unnoticed, the Minister continued on.

"I hereby relieve you of your position of Headmaster. Aurors are waiting outside your office, waiting to escort you from the school's grounds. We will contact all of the Heads of House, as well as order all Hogwarts students back to their respective Common Rooms."

Fawkes, positioned upon his roost, trilled angrily at the three intruders, his eyes blazing, prompting Edgecombe to take a step backwards.

"Calm yourself, Fawkes," Dumbledore ordered, though his voice held an amused tone. Turning back to the Minister, he locked eyes with bureaucrat.

""Very well."

"You can't do this!" Harry declared, yelling at the three politicians. "Who's going to find Hermione?"

"She's been taken to the Chamber of Secrets," Lucius replied coldly. "Dumbledore has had ample opportunity to locate the Chamber, and has been unable to do so. He had his opportunity."

Harry opened his mouth to argue further, but Dumbledore reached onto the desk, lifting up Hermione's book bag by one of the straps.

"Please, Harry," he urged. "Inform your friends back in the library, and then return to the Slytherin Common Room."

"That's enough!" Edgecombe snapped impatiently. "You are no longer the Headmaster, and have no business ordering students around."

"My apologies," he said lightly. "If the Minister relieves me of my duty, then it is my responsibility to step aside. However," he added, his

gaze sweeping about the room, "you will find that I have only truly left this school when none here are loyal to me...help will always be given at Hogwarts to those who ask for it."

Without a look back, Dumbledore walked towards the spiral staircase, back straight, head held high. With a grinding of stone, the moving stairs bore him away. The Minister and Malfoy, each sending him unreadable looks, followed the former Headmaster down. At the top, Edgcombe turned around, her lips turned upward in an almost unconscious snarl.

"The Board may have let you off, but one day, I'm going to make sure you pay for what you did to Gilderoy."

Meeting her gaze, Harry stayed silent. She seemed to grow further incensed by his silence, hatred clouding her eyes. Turning swiftly, she turned and stomped down the stairs, not bothering to wait for them to turn.

Left alone, his fist shook with anger, clutching Hermione's book bag. Dumbledore was gone, Hogwarts was being evacuated, and the one person who might know how to stop it all had just been taken into the Chamber.

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

It was with a heavy heart that Harry entered the library, tasked with telling his friends that Hermione had been taken.

At his arrival, Neville began to excitedly wave him over, which made his heart ache even more.

"Tracey found it..." Neville began, before trailing off, noting the anguished expression upon his face, and the book bag slung over his shoulder.

"Harry, why do you have Hermione's book bag?" Millicent hesitantly asked.

"S-she's been taken to the Chamber," Harry explained, his voice heavy with emotion.

Gasps rung out around the table, quickly followed by Neville's fist slamming down on the table.

"Then what are we doing standing around here?" he demanded, his voice rising in volume. "Why aren't we helping Dumbledore look for her?"

"Dumbledore's been sacked," Harry explained, gritting his teeth. "The Minister said that Hogwarts must be evacuated until it's safe for students to return."

"So who's looking for Hermione?" Neville demanded, standing up from the table.

"We are," Harry answered, opening Hermione's book bag. Separate from the other books and pieces of parchment was a copy of a wizarding obituary. In the moving, black and white picture, a young girl alternated between a nervous smile and a suspicious glare. Huge, circular glasses with thick frames took up most of her face, while long, dark hair hung lank to either side of her face.

"Moaning Myrtle?" Millicent questioned, cocking her head to the side.

"Look," Tracey implored, tracing the top of the obituary with her index finger. "Died, 1948, the same year the Chamber of Secrets was last opened."

"So what..." Harry started to question, before the truth hit him. "She never left, did she?"

"No, she didn't," Tracey said, shaking her head. "It was under our noses the entire time. She was the student killed when the Chamber was last open. We find her, and we find where it is."

"It's the best bet we have," Harry agreed. "I just wish we knew what the monster guarding it was."

"Found it," Tracey swiftly declared. Opening wide the book on monsters, she spun it around, directing his attention to the left-hand page. "Read."

Skimming the text quickly, under the title 'Basilisk', the pieces began to fall into place. No wonder he was the only who had heard it. But what about...

"Wait," Harry said, holding up his hand. "It says the stare of the basilisk kills people, not petrifies them."

"It killed Filch," Millicent pointed out.

"Yeah, Ernie and McLaggen got lucky. I assume that Ernie saw its reflection in the water outside the bathroom, and McLaggen saw it in the curved mirror. It didn't outright kill them, but was powerful enough to petrify them."

"Great work," he said, congratulating Tracey, his mind whirring.

"So, we know what's in there," Neville impatiently declared. "Can we finally go after her?"

Harry shook his head, causing Neville's face to begin to redden.

"Not just yet, at least. The Aurors are probably going to be patrolling the halls, making sure all of the students return to their Common Rooms. We have to wait until they do head-counts, and then slip away on the way back to the Great Hall."

"And then we find Myrtle?"

Harry nodded.

"And then we rescue Hermione."

X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X -|- X-X-X-X-X-X

Author Notes:

I apologize for the vast wait, but work and other real-life responsibilities took precedence. However, I am working on the next chapter, and have the first 10k words already written. I hope to have it out in a two or three weeks.

I decided to split up the final chapter it two halves. The next chapter is year two's true climax, with the resolution coming in the one after

that. It's quite liberating to finally be able to write down all the scenes with have shone brightly in my mind for more than a year.

As always, any comments or criticisms are welcome. Even a quick "I liked it" or "it sucked" would be appreciated. Any questions, ask away. I reply to every review I receive

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